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Nintend'oh

HOW THE REAL WORLD IS FINALLY TAKING ITS TOLL ON THE HOUSE OF MARIO



THE FUTURE OF XBOX ONE
Will Microsoft's latest plans to save Xbox work?

THE SIMS 4
Hands-on with Maxis' ground-breaking life simulator

LIVING DANGEROUSLY
David Braben risking it all with Elite Dangerous



ALIEN ISOLATION
Sega's terrifying plans for survival horror unmasked

HOMEFRONT 2
Why the stunning sequel is starting from scratch

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HIGHLIGHTS
THE EVIL WITHIN ■ WATCH DOGS ■ WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER ■ BELOW ■ BOUND BY FLAME ■ SHADOW OF MORDOR ■ ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV ■ HOTLINE MIAMI 2 ■ DRIVECLUB ■ HABITAT ■ GAUNTLET ■ H1Z1

Has *Mario Kart 8* arrived too late?

It's a question that Wii U owners are having too much fun flinging blue shells at Luigi to answer, but it's an important question nonetheless. Nintendo's fortunes have fluctuated wildly in recent times and *Mario Kart 8* is the perfect example – the kart racer has slid off shelves to the tune of 1.2 million sales in its opening weekend, bringing the Wii U back into conversation. But who's buying? New Wii U owners who bought a game for the superb sliding and shelling carnage or those who have dusted off their console now they finally have something to play?

It fits into the wider conversation about Nintendo and its place in the changing landscape of gaming. It's a difficult topic to address in a balanced manner that considers all angles and sides without someone getting upset – our cover, of course, is deliberately provocative and edgy – but we feel our feature has achieved this. We'd love to hear your thoughts on both our article and your own feelings about Nintendo.

Small disclaimer to end with: I was a Sega fanboy growing up and my childish devotion to Master System and Mega Drive saw me opposed to Nintendo. But nowadays, the Japanese company represents one of the last few links to a gaming culture that has been bypassed for me-too military gunfests and 'mature' storytelling that favours cutscenes over gameplay. So I sincerely hope Nintendo continues to find success as it has done with *Mario Kart 8* – the big question is how?

Ryan King

Ryan King
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



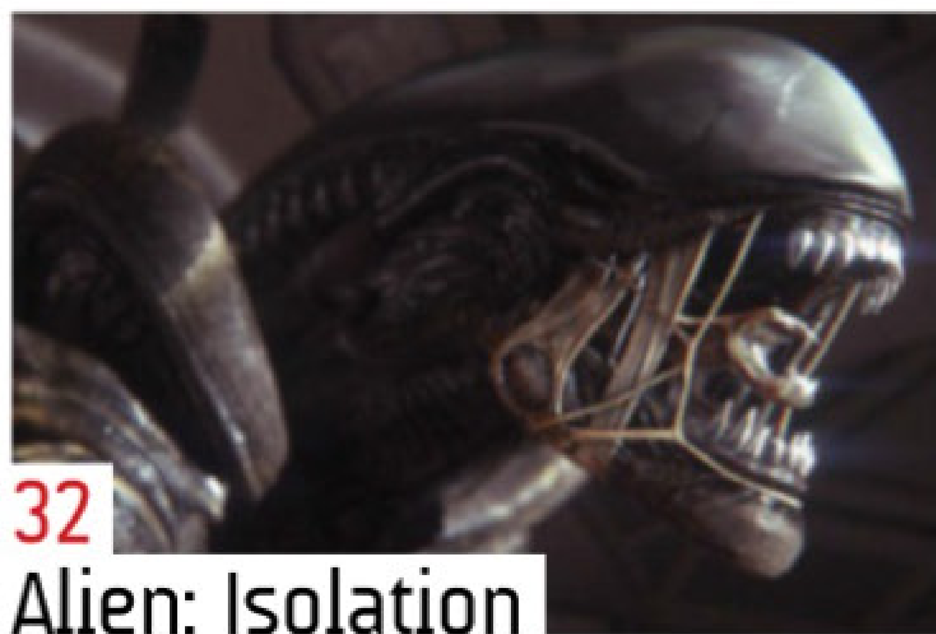
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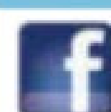

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Discuss

NEWS / INDUSTRY GOSSIP / OPINION / YOUR VIEWS

(Power to the People)

How Microsoft's ID@Xbox scheme is saving the Xbox One

→ After Sony made ripples by throwing its support behind independent developers, can Microsoft catch up by offering indies a foothold in the XBLA market? We speak to developers releasing games through ID@Xbox to find out

Last month saw Microsoft unveil 25 titles that will be published by its ID@ Xbox program, the first big announcement the program has offered since its inception back in August 2013. This is the loudest pro-indie move Microsoft has made for a long time, and is much needed following the hardware/software giants seemingly inaccessible and unfriendly indie stance at last year's E3. Even back in the 360 days, Microsoft has never been seen as indie-friendly as its Sony rival (who grabs the indie exclusives, often to great acclaim, such as *Spelunky*, *Transistor* and *Nidhogg*).

At the Game Developers Conference 2014, though, Microsoft set out on a campaign that seems dedicated to righting the wrongs of its past, showcasing 25 titles that are ready to launch across the Xbox brand and promising 250 more independent developers had been courted for the ID@Xbox program. Developers that sign on to the scheme are promised full access to all the developmental tools unique to Microsoft – achievement support, Kinect and SmartGlass compatibility – in exchange for signing a parity clause that guarantees either platform exclusivity to Microsoft for a while, or same-day launches if the game is multiplatform (Microsoft is keen to state the parity clause is signed on a game-by-game basis, but generally speaking, the outlined system seems to be the most common). While this makes sense from Microsoft's perspective – it doesn't want games released on its consoles coming out later than its rivals, that means categorically less sales – it's not always beneficial to the developer: different platforms require different focuses, and while the Xbox One and PS4 are similar to develop for, they're not identical. Consequently, it might be beneficial for indies



DATA STREAM → MICROSOFT REVEALS KINECT-LESS XBOX ONE. IS THIS THE END OF MOTION CONTROLS?

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to stagger their releases as they work out the best way of releasing their games for each console – a strategy which Microsoft's parity clause could render impossible.

SONY DON'T OFFER such restrictions to independent developers that want to publish their games on PSN, but Microsoft is resolute in its position with ID@Xbox, claiming the support and unique features it offers to smaller developers outweighs the price of the parity clause. "Microsoft has bent over backwards to help us." explains Born Ready Games' Jamin Smith. "We've not been forced to take advantage of features that wouldn't fit the game, and we've just been able to make it the best that it can be." *Strike Suit Zero* – Born Ready's first game published through the program – was one of the first ID@Xbox games released, so it's reassuring to hear that Microsoft isn't forcing developers to use Xbox-exclusive hardware, even when that's a facet of the ID@Xbox program that the publisher is so keen to promote.

Martin Brouard, executive producer at Frima Studios – the developer behind the Xbox One's upcoming *Chariot* – was keen to show his support for Microsoft too. "So far [working with Microsoft] has been a great and smooth experience. The ID@Xbox team has been very responsive – proactive, even. We can honestly feel their excitement for *Chariot* as well as the other indie games that are part of the program." Australian developer Blowfish Studio has been working on *Gunscape* – a game that is practically *Minecraft* meets *Quake* – and managing director Ben Lees explains, "Microsoft has been great to work with and has helped to achieve whatever's been needed... Even if →



Above *Below* is one of the most exciting games announced for the Xbox One so far, highlighting the importance of paying attention to the smaller developer for innovative and interesting ideas.

> "The other App Stores are completely open; it could be a good time to do the opposite and to have a lightly curated indie game hub"
>
> Blowfish Studios, Ben Lee

Below Right ID@Xbox seems to be championing the kind of game that otherwise wouldn't see a particularly strong support base. *CastleStorm*, for example, is a tower defence-cum-Angry Birds game that you perhaps wouldn't expect to see on console.



DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENTS

→ Is this the golden age of game design?

Right now, we're in a renaissance of the small studio; a time where anyone has the resources and ability to make a game. We asked our willing interviewees what they thought of the indie movement in the generation so far, and where they think we're going:

"Right now is an incredible moment in gaming history. It's a golden age. There are so many possibilities for small teams of passionate developers to make the games they truly believe in and deliver them to its intended audience. Some of these games will have a deep impact on our industry and that can only be good. And gamers win." – Martin Brouard, Frima Studio

"Now that it has become very easy to deliver indie content to gamers, I think the future is extremely bright.

> "Right now is an incredible moment in gaming history"
>
> Martin Brouard, Frima Studio

You'll continue to see a lot of risks and innovations coming from small, independent games. Occasionally one of those will resonate with people and it will spawn something with a larger budget. It's a win for everyone." – Alex Jebailey, Iron Galaxy Studios

"Indie games will be big – much bigger than in the previous generation where the tools weren't quite accessible enough for many indies to compete against the larger studios. I feel that indie games and larger crowd-funded games will complement the triple-A games that get released this generation." – Ben Lee, Blowfish Studios

"The future is so bright for indies. The big innovations and new ideas are really coming from indies. I think indies are willing to risk it all and are not afraid of failure – players totally get this, and want indies to succeed at being different and original and have been showing huge support with their wallets." – Mel Kirk, Zen Studios

→ A LEAK AT EA REVEALS BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE, THE LATEST ENTRY IN THE SHOOTER FRANCHISE →

Inset *Contrast* was one of the first games to be pushed through with ID@Xbox, and it did surprisingly well – there was some criticism, but the game was received positively by the gaming community and achieved far more exposure than it would have if ID@Xbox wasn't around.

> "ID@Xbox is still in its early days, so there are a few hiccups here and there, but overall we are so happy with how fast things are happening"
>
> Zen Studios, Mel Kirk

➔ we did have some issues getting the [Xbox One development kit] into Australia!"

"ID@Xbox is still in its early days, so there are a few hiccups here and there, but overall we are really happy with how fast things are happening for us, and ID@Xbox staff have been fantastic," explains Mel Kirk of Zen Studios, whose *Castlestorm: Definitive Edition* is headed to the Xbox One soon, courtesy of ID@Xbox. What Kirk says is potent – the program is still in its early stages. While the overwhelming response we've received has been positive, there's still an uncertainty about the permanence of ID@Xbox (Sam Abbot, of Compulsive Games – the studio behind *Contrast* – also claims, "There's a lot of learning, on both sides, going on!") The as-yet unnamed 250 developers that have climbed on-board with the scheme promise a little longevity, but – for the average independent studio – seeing a general release on the Xbox Live store still seems like a big commitment.

WHERE THE PSN has a dedicated outlet for indie games – as well as incentives to release them through its runaway success of a scheme in PS+ – the Xbox One doesn't. Rather, all releases are offered through the same store – the umbrella Xbox Live store – and there's no option to filter out indie releases from their triple-A peers. This issue is divisive, though, with some developers thinking it will put them on equal footing with the triple-A behemoths and others thinking it'll put them on the back-foot.

Blowfish Studio's Ben Lee is against the idea, considering that perhaps a specialist indie hub is a better way to go. "I think [keeping indies separate] might be a smart move, at a time when Valve is ending Greenlight and the other app stores are completely open, it could be a good time to do the opposite and to have a lightly curated game hub. With discoverability always an issue, having a specific hub would help indie games find their audience." Mel Kirk agrees, saying "[Microsoft's] level of marketing support and store exposure will show us all how committed it is to the indie community."

It's hard not to compare the marketing strategies on digital platforms to Steam – the PC distribution service has galvanised



Above Access to SmartGlass and Kinect features allow developers to use unique features that could become selling points for their games.



STEAM CONTROLLERS HAVE BEEN DELAYED TO 2015. WILL THE STEAM MACHINE SUFFER THE SAME DELAY?

this generation of game-making, and was largely responsible for bringing the spotlight upon the indie scene to begin with. Between Greenlight's eventual demise and the open nature of submission to the platform, Steam has laid the groundwork for both Sony and Microsoft –PlayStation has evidently taken lessons from Steam, so Microsoft would be well-advised to pay attention to how Steam markets indie games specifically, and apply lessons learned to a console-based context.

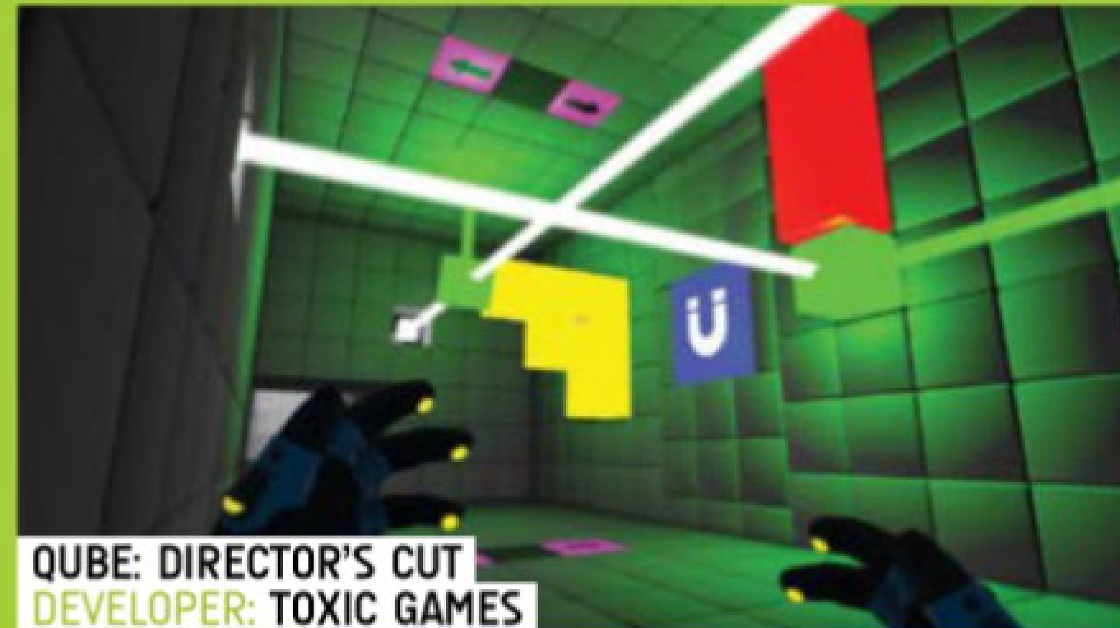
"More discoverability options for titles is super important and as the number of releases increases virtual shelf space always become a problem," explains Frima Studio's Martin Brouard. "A well-curated indie game hub would be great to promote titles to a specific audience. However, indie titles shouldn't be relegated to indie sections only and should also be featured on the main console stores. Indie games should be enjoyed by everyone."

It's refreshing to note that Microsoft is keen to support indies as much as its rivals, and the ID@Xbox program is a stride in the right direction if Microsoft is intent on keeping up with Sony. The indie revolution happening within Microsoft's offices could prove to be its most important decision made yet. 



ID@XBOX ROUND-UP

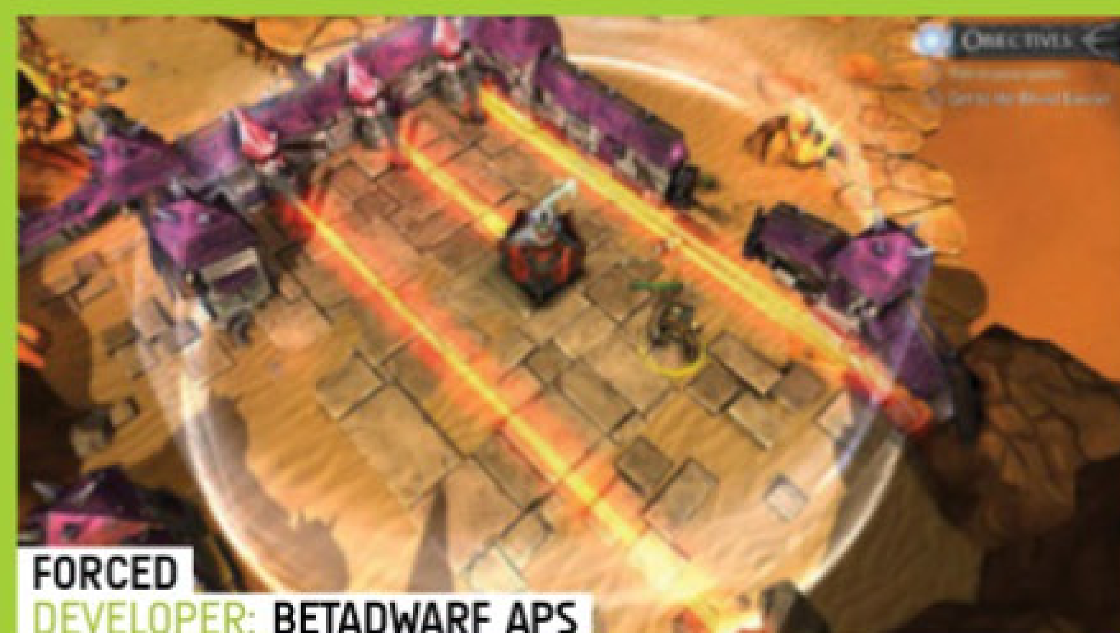
→ Microsoft has so far announced 25 indie games for the Xbox One – ranging from beat-em-ups to racing games, RPGs to Minecraft-inspired adventures. Here's a rundown of our ten most anticipated ID@Xbox games:



QUBE: DIRECTOR'S CUT
DEVELOPER: TOXIC GAMES



THE LAST TINKER: CITY OF COLOURS
DEVELOPER: MIMIMI PRODUCTIONS



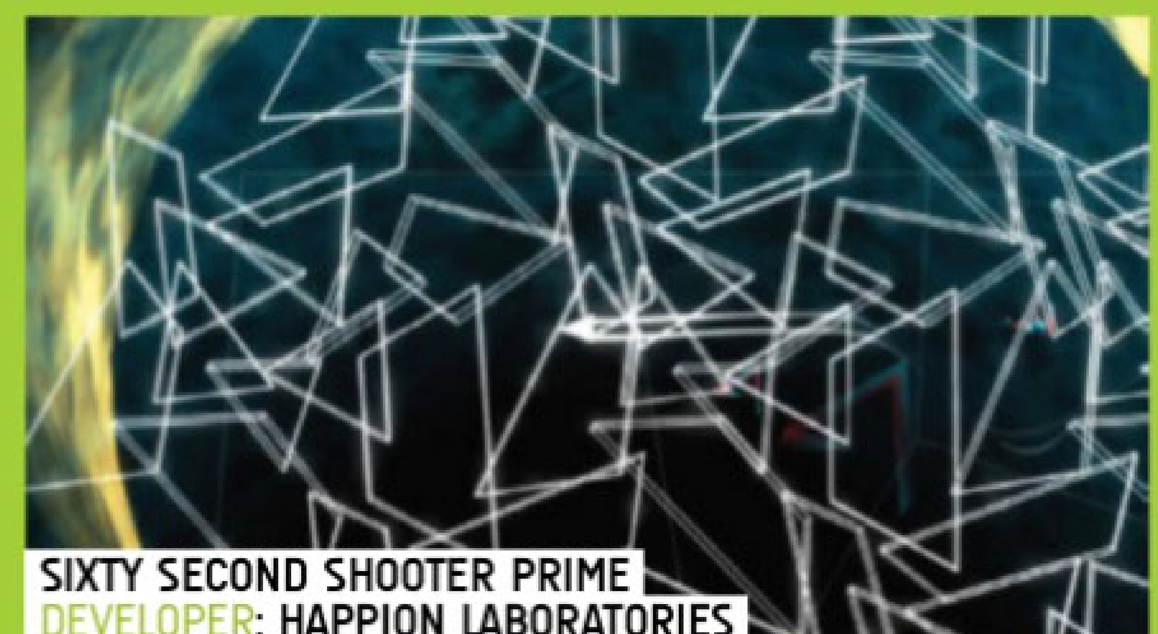
FORCED
DEVELOPER: BETADWARF APS



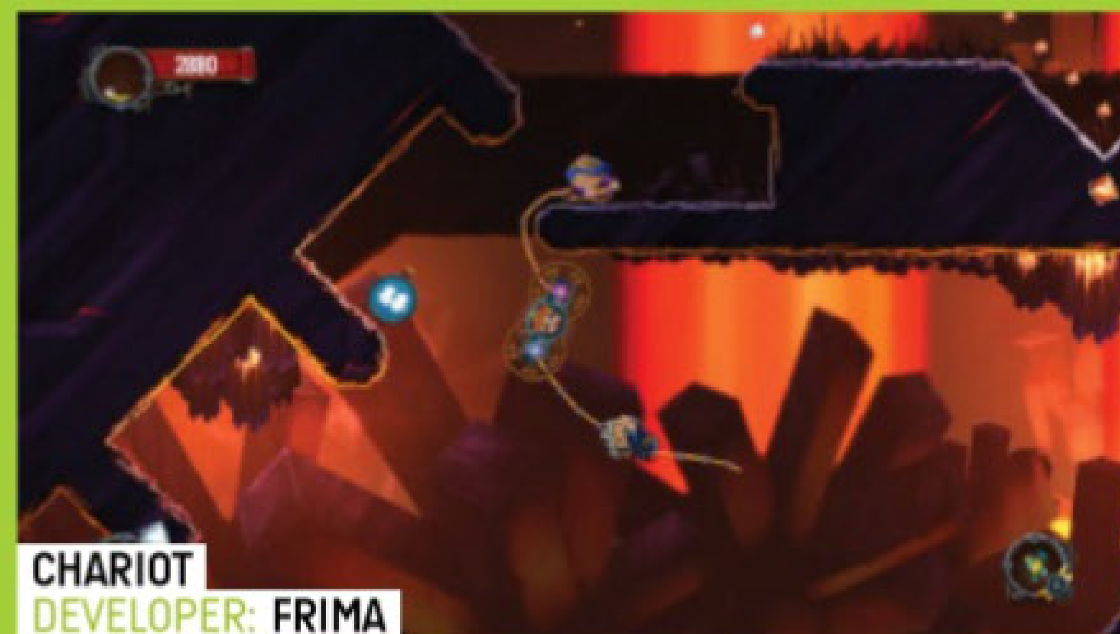
GUACAMELEE! SUPER TURBO CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION
DEVELOPER: DRINKBOX STUDIOS



CASTLESTORM: DEFINITIVE EDITION
DEVELOPER: ZEN STUDIOS



SIXTY SECOND SHOOTER PRIME
DEVELOPER: HAPPION LABORATORIES



CHARIOT
DEVELOPER: FRIMA



CALIBRE 10 RACING SERIES
DEVELOPER: BONGFIHS GMBH



GUNSCAPE
DEVELOPER: BLOWFISH STUDIOS



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER
DEVELOPER: HEART MACHINE

→ EPIC GAMES RELEASES FLAPPY BIRD CLONE TO SHOW OFF UNREAL ENGINE 4. REALLY. →



(2D OR NOT 2D? THAT IS THE QUESTION)

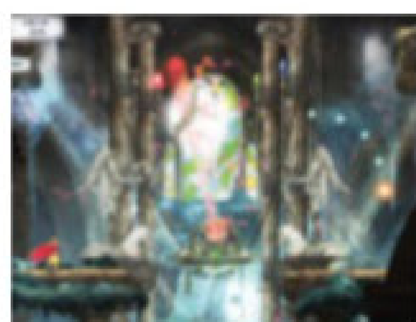
Bringing A New Dimension To 2D Gaming

→ **games™** sits down with Valiant Hearts associate producer Guillaume Cerda to talk about how the UbiArt Framework enables smaller teams to make the most of their time and creativity

As we witness the console market embrace new digital distribution methods and support the indie development scene, it's becoming more and more important for the industry's publishing behemoths to venture outside of the reliable old triple-A game and take risks, gamble with new IP. Diversification is becoming more and more important to Ubisoft particularly, and the publisher's UbiArt Framework is spear-heading the expedition into some really innovative, interesting territory.

For a lot of gamers, it doesn't matter how a game looks – to get them playing through to the end of a release, the developer will have to make it *play*, too. Unfortunately, it's never that simple – there tends to be a trade-off between art direction and gameplay in a lot of titles, consequential of discrepancies between developmental departments, end vision or simply time constraints.

Ubisoft's UbiArt Framework aims to combat these issues – the engine has seen a lot of use in recent years, with *Rayman Origins* acting as a proof of concept for the Framework, followed up with *Rayman Legends*, and then more recently we've had the dark horse *Child Of Light* proving that the framework is more than a one-trick pony. "The *Rayman* games were very cartoony," explains Guillaume Cerda, associate producer of newest UbiArt game, *Valiant Hearts*, "and *Child Of Light* had this very watercolour-y inspiration. With *Valiant Hearts*, we wanted to make an interactive comic book – that was very much the idea from the start of development – and the UbiArt Framework has allowed us to do that, in a way that was very respectful to our inspirations."



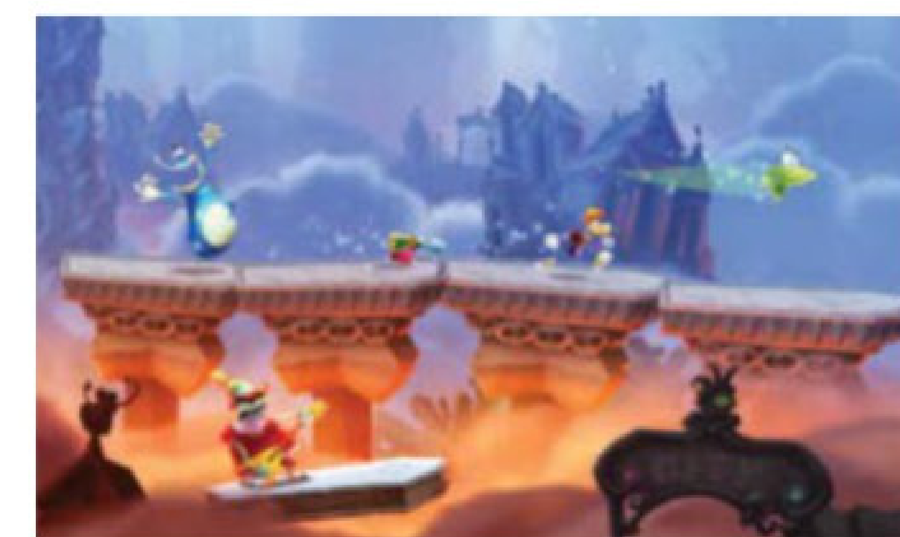
Above With more of a focus on light than anything else in UbiArt, *Child Of Light* emphasises just how versatile the engine is, even within the 2D field.

Valiant Hearts: The Great War has a visual style that takes the cartoony minimalism of early comics and applies it to a rather brutal and ugly context: the First World War. The contrast between the sharp colours and the caricatured characters to the thematic content of the game is striking – the result being a non-verbal comic that highlights the horrors of war without patronising or saying a word. It communicates through its art, and it does it very well.



> "Do you know how much concept art there is for this game? None"

THIS IS BECAUSE, in part, UbiArt allows the artist that creates the assets to directly influence the gameplay – where other development processes see an artist sketch out concept art, pass it through to level designers, character designers, 3D artists and whole other departments, the small teams that work on UbiArt games put their vision directly into the engine. "You have no idea how direct the process is in getting your raw ideas into the game," explains Cerda. "You know how much concept art there is for this game? None. That's because all the visuals and all the graphics you'll see in this game are done by one guy, [Paul Tumelaire]." After the main artist passes his assets onto the level artists, the directly graph skeletons onto the art, creating the interactive objects and solid surfaces in the game world. By creating skeletons inside characters or buildings,





DEMONS' SOULS AND DARK SOULS DIRECTOR HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI HAS BEEN MADE PRESIDENT OF FROM SOFTWARE



Inset The distinct art style in *Rayman* evokes the nostalgia of the franchise, yet upgrades it all to run with silky smooth animation and output at a glorious definition.

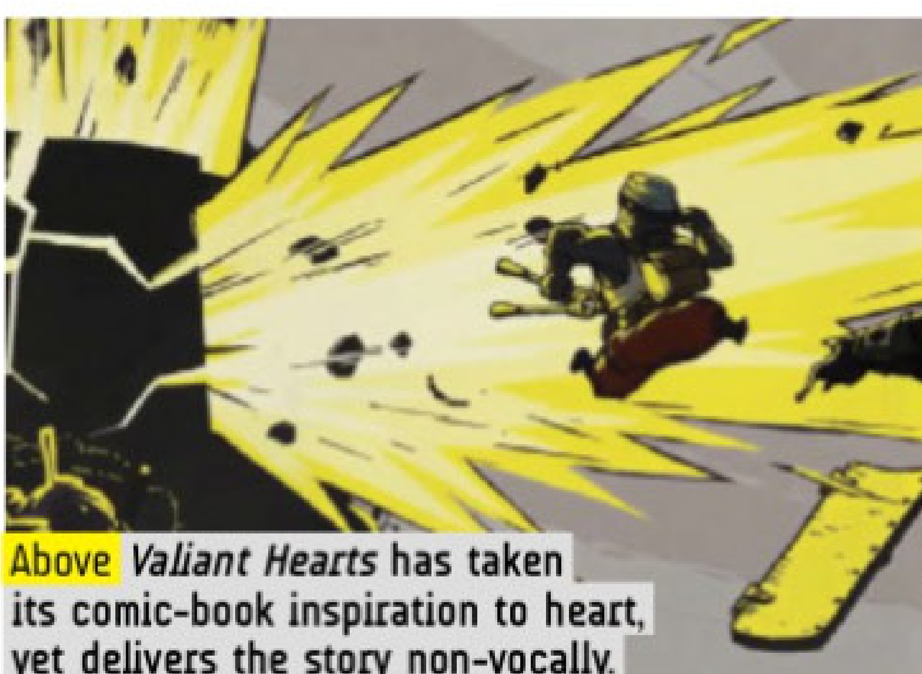
hand-drawn art can be animated by the Framework with ease, allowing the game developers to focus on establishing solid gameplay and mechanics (showcased beautifully by *Rayman*'s handling and collision detection) whilst the artists can focus on bringing every detail of the world to life (demonstrated by the significant detail visible in *Child Of Light*).

"The UbiArt Framework makes is platform agnostic, too," explains Cerda, "which makes it very easy for us to output our games on multiple consoles. The technology behind the engine allows us to output at 60 frames per second and 1080p easily, too, so [the staff] working on the games can focus on releasing 2D games that pay homage to the 16-bit roots of 2D, but with the animations and depth you'd expect from a release in 2014."

We've seen a resurgence in the 2D game over the last few years, and we sincerely hope the ease of which the UbiArt Framework allows smaller teams to produce games will mean more experimental titles coming from Ubisoft's internal studios. *Valiant Hearts* was created by a team of 15, and as such has retained the intimate touch that only comes from a small crew's project. In the triple-A gaming scene, this is something that's sorely missed, and we anticipate Ubisoft's next move eagerly – especially if the rumours about an UbiArt *Prince Of Persia* prove fruitful.









Above *Valiant Hearts* has taken its comic-book inspiration to heart, yet delivers the story non-vocally.

DEPTH OF THE FIELD

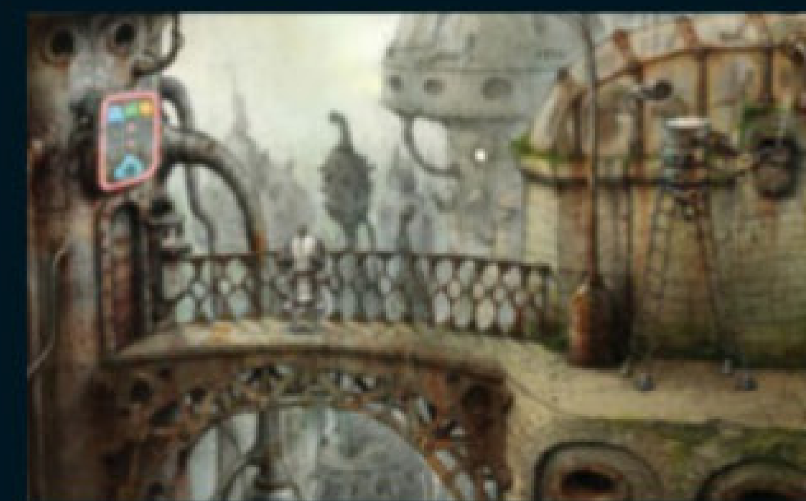
→ Hand-drawn games seem to have a more personal feel. Here are our favourite 2D games released over the last generation

SKULLGIRLS



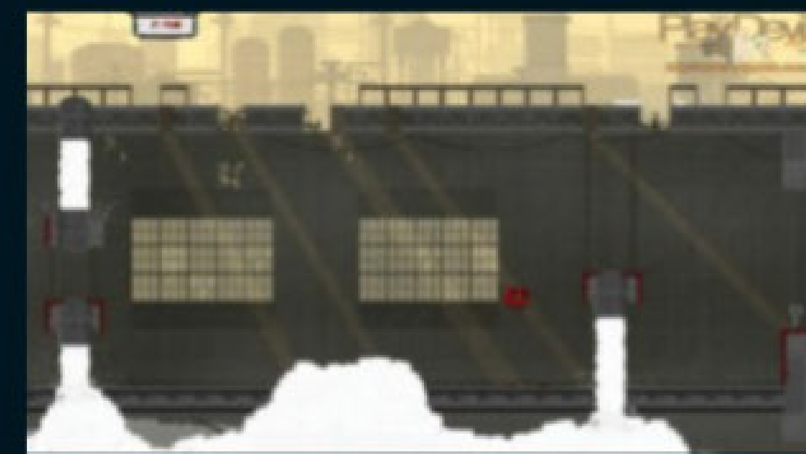
■ Reverge Labs' first release, *Skullgirls*' concept came from the illustrations Alex 'o_8' Ahad had been keeping on the backburner since college combined with the creative force of a fighting tournament pro-fighter – Mike Z – who wanted to put his knowledge into a game of his own. The result? A fighting game that's uber-techincal, yet incredibly detailed with some genuinely unique character designs.

MACHINARIUM



■ Amanita Designs' Flash-based point-n-click caught the attention of many gamers when it was released on PS+ in 2013. The highly detailed and painstakingly illustrated visuals of the game took over three years to develop, and only seven Czech developers constructed the entire game. The robotic world and languid backdrop of *Machinarium* highlight the immense detail that 2D worlds can achieve.

SUPER MEAT BOY



■ Team Meat's runaway success of a game started out as a Flash-based project online, before seeing a release on XBLA. Critically acclaimed by just about everyone, the cartoon uber-violence of *Super Meat Boy* took full advantage of its 2D context; making the most of the caricature mutilations and fleshy explosions you probably couldn't get away with in realistic graphics engines.

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH



■ Matt Stone and Trey Parker proved that the *South Park* formula is capable of existing outside of just TV with 2014's *The Stick Of Truth* – a game that played exactly like an episode of the cult TV show. Voiced, written and overseen by the formidable creative duo, *The Stick Of Truth* proves that even crappy animation can work in games if it's pulled off knowingly enough.

→ FORMER IRRATIONAL GAMES STAFF HAS FORMED A NEW STUDIO CALLED DAY FOR NIGHT GAMES →

(GENRE EQUALITY)

The Problem With Game Genres

→ **Videogames are fairly unique in the media landscape – where other entertainment formats categorise their works by classification of theme or content, videogames apply genre to the mechanics they consist of. But is this the most effective way of grouping games? What are the alternatives?**

Inset *DayZ* manages to avoid the genre trap – it's an MMORPG, but once you penetrate the superficial skin of the game, you'll find so much more. Technically, *DayZ* started out as an *Arma II* mod, so wouldn't that technically make it a 'mod', as defined by genre?

Broadly, the classification of games has evolved to suit an expansive range of genres, defining each in an understandable and communicative manner – if you pick up a game which calls itself a 'first-person shooter', you know you'll be playing a game whose camera sits behind the eyes of the protagonist as you engage in military combat with hostile forces. If you pick up a 'fighter', either 2D or 3D, you know you'll be put into an arena setting and have to input button combinations to pull of moves that'll render your opponent unconscious. If you pick up a 'sim', you know the central crux of the gameplay will revolve around emulating a specific experience as closely as possible – the same applies for any other genre.

Games are different from the majority of other media; we're an interactive medium, non-linear and diverse in our distribution methods. Films, books and television are all linear and self-contained, allowing categorisation by theme or story rather easily – something that games will never be able to compare to. After all, by TV/film/book standards, *Gravity* fits into the same genre as *Star Trek* – an insult to what both films are trying to do – so why do we see the same issue with games, even when we use mechanics to separate titles?

The problem lies within the nuance of each designated classification – according to the current paradigm, the *Call Of Duty* series supposedly goes hand-in-hand with *BioShock*, which in turn sits beside *Portal*. The *Tony Hawk* games would sit snugly alongside *Don Bradman Cricket*, or *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games*. It's a flawed system, and one that would see a co-operative, group-based, RPG, loot-'em-up shooter like *Borderlands* be categorised as *the same type of game* as *Doom*, or *Spec Ops: The Line*, or *Halo*. In an age where we're seeing greater disparity in what games are, and what they can do, we're still using a fairly archaic system by which to understand and explain their core mechanics.

It all stems from how games were made, marketed and – basically – limited when the industry took its first forays into the public eye. Back in the 8-bit days, there was fairly little you could do with a game beyond making

Below *Tony Hawk* is a sports franchise, but it also kind of isn't – and where does that leave the *UFC* games – sports or fighting?





MORTAL KOMBAT X HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED BY NETHERREALM STUDIOS FOR CURRENT AND LAST-GEN CONSOLES



Inset When you think of how else to categorise a game, the fighting genre is always tricky. It's not like you could name them based on their narratives...

"In an age where we're seeing greater disparity games, we're still using a fairly archaic system by which to understand their core mechanics"

some pixels move around other pixels. Moving onto the 16-bit era, genres started to evolve and expand; you had – in their most primitive forms – sports games, platformers, puzzle games, text-based adventures. This scattering of genre formed the basis for how we would eventually come to understand the games that would be made, going forward.

So what's the alternative – or an effective alternative, at least – to the way we classify the media we absorb so readily? Gaming magazines generally have moved away from a binary system of genre classification – some getting rid of the 'genre' sidebar altogether. There's such a cross-over and dilution of form nowadays that to adequately understand what a game *is*, you have to look into the details of what comprises it, further than just saying 'It's a first-person shooter'.

RPGs probably offer the best example of deviation from their original definitions – something like *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* would be classified more as an 'action-RPG', as would the entire *Mass Effect* series, yet both games are built on fundamentally different mechanics and play completely differently. So do we attempt to explain what an individual game does by applying an extra qualifying adjective to the front of each genre? Does *Mass Effect* become a sci-fi action-RPG? Does *Portal* become a physics-based puzzle platformer? Does *Dead Space* become a third-person, survival horror, RPG, physics-puzzle, co-op adventure? How long before you reach the point of ridicule?

It makes sense to look at the evolution of the music genre when considering how we're going to categorises games, going forward: music is the only other consumable media whose genres are defined by its mechanics – metal, electronica, folk, dubstep, classical; every category and its resultant sub-genres are defined purely by the creative method behind the music. As music has evolved, so too have specific terms for the new genres that appear: nu-metal, neo-classical, dancestep, post-rock – new suffixes and prefixes eventually settle in as bands and critics get used newer sounds. The same pattern is likely for games, then; evolving shortened genre terms to be more specific as time goes on.

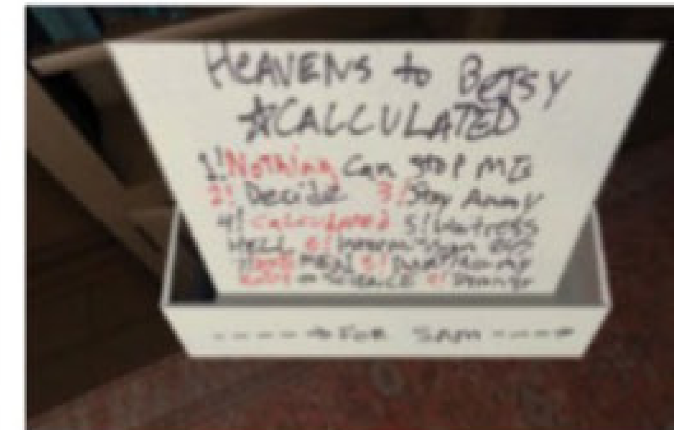
Until that time comes, however, we are just going to have to group the likes of *System Shock 2* with *Team Fortress* and be happy with it. 



Inset *Machinarium* is the purest example of a point-n-click game you could imagine; it's non-vocal, it's hand-drawn and it relies *solely* on pointing and, well, clicking. It's the very definition of a genre game.

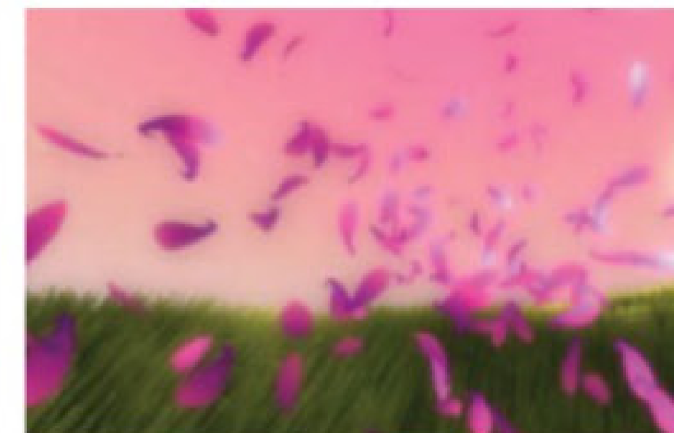
DEFYING CLARITY

→ We're in the midst of puberty as an industry, struggling to find where we fit in. Still, every now and then developers throw out a game that completely defies reasonable categorisation, landing in the middle of a group of genres and confusing everyone. At games™ we appreciate that madness, so we've collected our favourite examples:



GONE HOME

■ Released on the PC last year, and coming to consoles later this year, *Gone Home* was a narrative game that focused on telling a story, rather than revelling in any discernible gameplay. It's like a visual novel you walk around in – similar to the text-based adventures of old, yet pulled off with clarity and a personal intimacy you could only evoke through interaction.



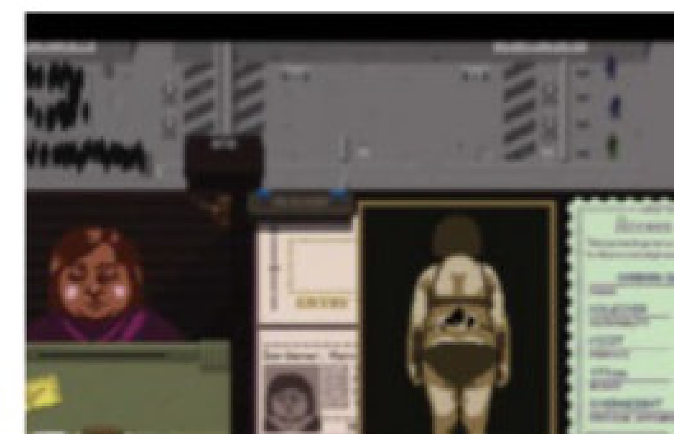
FLOWER

■ A game where you control the wind to blow the dream of a flower from a city apartment's window to an open field, purely by tilting the PS3's Sixaxis controller, sounds like an idea that would get laughed out of any pitch. However, thatgamecompany's seminal dark horse managed to get past any barriers to see a release on PSN. Part platformer, part adventure, part physics puzzle and part LSD trip, *Flower* is a stunning and completely original concept.



JOURNEY

■ Another PSN stalwart, *Journey* sits somewhere between open-world adventure game and co-op puzzler. Yet it's also a curious art game, and a bit of a music video, too. It took delicate steps into new territory – with some critics saying it's not even a game – and inspired a vibrant and talkative community, full of gamers intent on sniffing out all the game's weird secrets. We still don't know how that guy we played with once had a white cloak...



PAPERS, PLEASE

■ While the 'sim' genre is an all-encompassing umbrella term, *Papers, Please* subverts the uber-realism of the genre, setting you up on the border of a politically tumultuous country, and tasking you with screening the passports of desperate refugees. Unless 'admin simulator' and 'morality test' can fuse to form some distinct genre, *Papers, Please* falls into that curious wonderland of uncategorised genius.

→ MARIO KART 8 SOLD OVER 1.2 MILLION UNITS IN ITS OPENING WEEKEND, MAKING IT WII U'S FASTEST SELLER 



KONGETSU

HUNT SABOTAGED

MonHan clones: the Japanese export the rest of the world doesn't even want



Despite having had little to shout about in the last year aside from Xbox One launch title *Dead Rising 3*, a *Lost Planet* game I only just remembered thanks to writing about it and the ironically-titled *Remember Me*, Capcom is somehow in the black. Witchcraft? No. A stellar in-house legal team? Cute (read: OBJECTION!), but still no. It's all down to the one major release I somehow forgot to mention previously, namely *Monster Hunter 4*. In case you weren't already aware, 'Monster Hunter' is Japanese for 'money' and this franchise is effectively what is keeping Capcom afloat right now.

As such, it's probably no real surprise that other developers have caught the scent of these mad profits and want a piece for themselves. But here's the bit that publishers don't seem to get: just as *COD* clones only sell even vaguely well in countries where *COD* has a stranglehold on the market, *Monster Hunter* clones simply don't sell outside of Japan. Sure, similar games like *Toukiden* and *Soul Sacrifice* did alright in Japan, but a spreadsheet will only get you so far in a situation like this. When dealing with a manner of consumption, a buying pattern or an entire culture that operates so differently to ours, numbers like that are effectively meaningless, however big they are.

It's a problem of perception. Many publishers will see success stories in the east and simply assume this translates to worldwide appeal, or at least a chance thereof. But with *Monster Hunter* imitators, such success cannot be guaranteed. Those are the numbers to be looking at a little closer. Hell, even the main series games typically sell more in Japan than the rest of the world combined – only *Monster Hunter Tri* managed to buck this trend, but then that's hardly surprising given how much cash Nintendo threw at promoting the Wii exclusive.

> In case you weren't aware, 'Monster Hunter' is Japanese for 'money'

Toukiden, despite being excellent, didn't manage to break 50k outside of Japan. *Soul Sacrifice* fared somewhat better but when even a Sony-published title can't do more than quarter of a million outside of Japan, you've got issues - no wonder it ended up on PS Plus so quickly. And who knows how well *Ragnarok Odyssey Ace* has done, but I'm guessing that the fingers and toes of a few friends would be all the counting aids I would need to track the game's success. When there are games like *Yakuza Ishin!* just begging to be ported and lapped up, it beggars belief that so much stock is put into copycat versions of a game that the US and Europe don't even care about. Don't cry, *Monster Hunter*. I care about you. It just happens that most of my peers don't.

Luke Albiges runs **Play** magazine, is an avid hunter of monsters and will import anything that looks like it'll never get a western release. Also anything that has Prinnies in it.



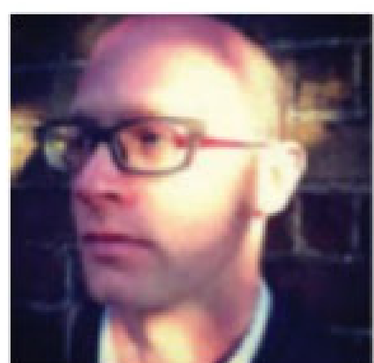
● There's no better way to try and understand the phenomenon than to embrace the game that sparked it. Since its release late last year in Japan, *Monster Hunter 4* has sold over three million copies, already making it the third best-selling game in the series. It's due to arrive in the west some time next year in an enhanced form but if you have a Japanese 3DS, that nine-month headstart will serve you well when you head online. That's right – *MH4* is the first handheld title in the series to feature native online play. Kudos for getting with the times, Capcom…



ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck

Lost Alpha ain't no Roadside Picnic



I've mostly kept my *STALKER* obsession away from this column, but with the release of Dezowave's *Lost Alpha* stand-alone mod, it's time to air some dirty post-apocalyptic laundry – blood and sweat stained vests, mouldy hats with chewed ear-flaps, old lead-lined pants, that sort of thing.

Nostalgia, the expected raft of early glitches, and some occasional lapses of judgement aside, *Lost Alpha* is a brilliant game. It's just too easy to say it's a window into the game that *Shadow Of Chernobyl* could have been, or once was, and I don't think that does justice to the team that made it. What's more interesting to me is what we can take from it. Here are my top points…

1 Modding ain't dead, punk. The scene seemed to take a hit with the rise of the indies, but *Lost Alpha* is everything that makes this community great. The love of a game, combined with a hunger to optimise, to explore, to push it forwards. A freedom of expression and an acceptance of errors. A big, bold flawed mutant born from nothing but passion, talent and free time. Modding still rules.

> Modding ain't dead, punk

2 Never stop the action. A genius move in *Lost Alpha* is you can only reload from ammo on your belt, meaning you have to do desperate inventory reshuffles in real-time, boosting stress and panic. You can almost never have too much stress and panic.

3 Emptiness is awesome. Having escaped a helicopter attack, I'm wandering around a deserted Darkscape, and the immersion is boosted exponentially because there's almost nothing there. It amplifies the intensity of discoveries and encounters massively. Not having *Day Z*-esque multiplayer murder squads in the world does, I gotta say, improve things. The single-player shooter experience still rules.



The *Lost Alpha* mod reimagines the brutal world of *STALKER* more vividly than ever before.

4 It's good to be tough. In a world where we are being suffocated by babysitting game design that's got you clamped into a headlock and an idiot-nipple rammed into your gums like a big stupid mewling infant, a game that is quite happy to let you get hopelessly, game-breakingly lost in a pitch-black underground space because you didn't ration your batteries is pretty refreshing.

5 Let chaos run. The emergent qualities of the A-Life system more than make up for its flaws with a lack of over-scripting. Games are so desperate to orchestrate and polish events now, they can end up feeling a little stale and fake. A-Life provides endless opportunities for events to occur without fanfare, that dreadful "LOOK AT THE EXPENSIVE ASSETS! NOTICE THEM! PLEASE!" desperation that's almost the triple-A clarion call these days, and this makes for a fantastically rich game experience.

6 Bugs can be good. I level transitioned from Agroprom to Garbage and somehow my beloved AK with sniper scope just vanished from my inventory. Which left me with a crappy pistol and a total of seven bullets, and a long walk to Rostock – but through a re-invented landscape that meant all of my previous knowledge of the Zone was useless. And somewhere off in the distance, between me and safety, a dog pack began to howl. Hello again, old friend. It's good to be back.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™.



“Sunset Overdrive looks like it'll make Titanfall's traversal seem amateurish”

Five Things About

Sunset Overdrive

From the makers of *Resistance* and *Ratchet & Clank* comes an open-world third-person shooter that looks like the lovechild of *Jet Set Radio* and *Crackdown*. Insomniac Studios is taking its off-the-wall style to new heights with a retro-punk aesthetic and an orange-based colour palette that puts the murky shooters we've seen on the Xbox One so far to shame

1 **It's parkour gone mad…**
Think about the mobility and freedom offered in *Jet Set Radio*, then imagine that in a completely open world swarming with mutants and with added vertical traversal. You can hop off the roofs of cars, grind on barriers and rails, hook on to telephone wires, run along walls and sprint-jump from rooftop to rooftop. *Sunset Overdrive* looks like it'll make *Titanfall*'s traversal seem amateurish, and with inspirations seemingly taken from skating games, hopefully we'll see a game that tackles the age-old problem of boring open-world navigation.

2 **It's an energy drink post-apocalypse…**
The bubonic, blistering zombies that run rampant through *Sunset Overdrive*'s streets aren't victims of your standard nuclear holocaust or magic curse, but rather they've been put there after developing an addiction to Overcharge Delirium XT, a new energy drink – and it's an addiction that can be exploited…

3 **Insomniac's practiced gun-craft…**
Arguably the best part of *Ratchet & Clank* was its reliance on zany weaponry; from elastic-band wrapped bouncing bombs to rayguns that turned targets into sheep (eat your heart out, *Worms*). Resistance, too, offered fantastic weapon design; picking up alien armaments guaranteed you a good time until your ammo clip ran dry.

4 **It's definitely not cover-based…**
Most of the third-person shooters we've played over the last few years took their queues from *Gears Of War*, opting to keep you hidden around corners or ducking behind handily placed barriers or mounds of dirt. *Sunset Overdrive* will penalise you for remaining static – the Overcharge-infused denizens of Sunset City will be relentless in their attack. Think on your feet, and use the freedom the environment offers you.

5 **It aims to amp up the fun…**
It's not all running and gunning – *Sunset Overdrive* also has a third core element: amps. Amps are chargeable perks that can be activated by causing enough havoc to build up your Overcharge meter. Amps range from emitting constant damage to enemies in the area, to leaving a trail of XT in your wake, damaging enemies with traversal techniques to setting off random nukes because, well, just *because*.



What Do You Want To See Next On PlayStation 4?

→ It's been a great year so far for Sony. Not only has the PlayStation 4 taken the lead in the next-gen hardware race, but the company continues to announce exciting additions to both its third and first-party software line-up. But what can we expect next and what do you want to see? games™ once again turns to the sagely wisdom of its readership to find out

■ They should revive Studio Liverpool and make a *WipEout* again.
Joël Hartmann, Facebook

■ *Syphon Filter*. It's been more than six years since the last entry (*Logan's Shadow*) ended with a cliffhanger and I want answers.
Robert Warnes, Facebook

■ A proper *Legacy Of Kain* game from @CrystalDynamics nothing beat *Soul Reaver* on the old PS1
@DINOsarus_rex, Twitter

■ Would love to see another *Yakuza* game come west. I absolutely love Japan and the *Yakuza* games really evoke the otherworldliness of the place. A new *Valkyria Chronicles* would look stunning on PS4 as well
Rob Hayes, Facebook

■ Definitely *Timesplitters*. The whole shooter genre has become so massively stale that it's hard to find it under all the mould. A fresh comical lighthearted approach would work wonders I think. They'd have to keep the split screen multiplayer though...
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

■ I would very much like to see a follow-up to *Kingdoms Of Amalur* as an exclusive. Even if the odds are less than slim.
Ben Seinstra, Facebook

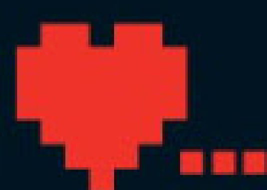
■ A new *Rick Dangerous*. Invisible traps, instant deaths, full level resets and all.
@Dookie3000, Twitter

■ *The Last Guardian* AAAHAHAHA that's so cancelled
@RobThez, Twitter

■ *Crash Bandicoot*
David Holmes, Facebook

■ *Jet Moto* and *G-Police!*
@bombback, Twitter

■ *Alex Kidd*. I think we can all agree that Sega's '*Sonic*' experiment was kind of a bust.
@El_Pinata, Twitter

WHY I ...

ICO

JENS MATTHIES, MACHINEGAMES

“*Ico* is one of my absolute favourite games of all time. I sat down one day and started playing it – at the time, I was playing it for research purposes at work – so I started in the morning, intending to just sit down with it for a minute or two and get a feel for the game. Next thing I knew, it was 5am in the morning and I was weeping at the keyboard… it was a really great game, I love it so much. The art style and everything, it just stays with me. It’s one of the best games you could play on the PS2 and, I think, the game that has stuck with me for the longest out of anything I’ve played.”



"Next thing I knew, it was 5am in the morning and I was weeping at the keyboard"

JENS MATTHIES, MACHINEGAMES



RADICAL EVOLUTION

MARKING THE INDEPENDENCE OF CRYTEK UK, HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION IS THE FIRST PROJECT FOR THE DEVELOPER FORMALLY KNOWN AS FREE RADICAL. **GAMES™** TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NOTTINGHAM STUDIO'S SURPRISE SEQUEL THAT, ACCORDING TO CRYTEK UK, ISN'T REALLY A SEQUEL

Homefront wasn't a particularly original idea. Kaos Studios made no secret of the fact that it had hired notoriously eccentric screenwriter John Milius (a self-proclaimed zen anarchist, outspoken conservative and avid gun collector – all of which inspired the creation of Walter, John Goodman's character in the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski*) to flesh out a barebones concept of guerrilla warfare across the streets of urban America. What he wrote was essentially a remake of his cult Eighties imperialism-cum-teen-melodrama war tale *Red Dawn*, only scaling down when it came to coiffed teen heartthrobs. So if the original *Homefront* was *Red Dawn*, what does that make its sequel, Crytek UK's (formally known as Free Radical Design) first solo venture, *Homefront: The Revolution*?

Well, for starters, don't call it a sequel. "We don't see this as a sequel, per se," explains Crytek UK's Fasahat Salim, game producer on the not-a-sequel. "We see it as a completely different game."

Even so, retaining the *Homefront* title does have its advantages, not least when it comes to brand recognition – the 2011 original is estimated to have sold over a million copies, which would make *The Revolution* more of a calculated risk. "We have used that universe because we felt that it was very interesting and unique," Salim says. "We looked at what *Homefront* did well; we know a lot of people enjoyed it and it resonated with a lot of players.



> "WE DON'T SEE THIS AS A SEQUEL, PER SE. WE SEE IT AS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT GAME"
>
> **Fasahat Salim, Crytek UK**

■ The game was originally a linear first-person shooter much like its predecessor. However, once THQ sold the IP to Crytek, the studio was able to expand the scope of the sequel substantially into an open-world shooter.

» So we wanted to take all of those positive aspects of what *Homefront* offered and take it into the Crytek world and tried to use our experience and the technology we had and expand it and push it as far as we can."

For anyone who needs an alternate future-history lesson, the original *Homefront* presented the worst of worst case scenarios, where in 2025 North Korea takes advantage of America's economic decline and invades the country, instituting a new dictatorship regime. Two years later a resistance forms to topple the KPA's imperial oppression, which ends rather triumphantly when the US reclaims much of the country's West Coast.

But this *isn't* a sequel. Don't expect *Homefront: The Revolution* to pick-up where the last game left off. The studio is remaining tight-lipped about plot specifics, but by all accounts *The Revolution* uses the original concept but ignores the events of the previous game. The year is 2029, four years after the invasion where the North Korea's occupation has matured, America on its knees and unable to match the KPA's superior technology.

■ The KPA's military equipment is far more advanced than that of the US forces. Crytek has a penchant for inventive future weaponry and it looks like *Homefront: The Revolution* won't disappoint in that regard.

The connective tissue between the two titles comes down to how the resistance fight back against the KPA forces. While *Homefront: The Revolution* won't rehash the same gameplay of its predecessor, the idea of guerrilla warfare across the streets of America – with small units utilising hit-and-run tactics, sabotaging enemy forces and conducting mobile ambushes – echoes across both games.

"We took that guerrilla warfare pillar and built what we were trying to do around that," explains Salim. "It came down to the point where everything we were putting into the game mission-wise, we were thinking 'How guerrilla is this?' If you feel like the badass marine running around killing people, that's not what we want."

You scramble through derelict buildings, scavenging for what little supplies have been abandoned, compiling what resources that can be used against the enemy. You scuttle across the rubble of a once civilised Philadelphia; discarded artefacts of the city's halcyon past lie next to spent ammo casings; riled citizens are beaten in the street by law enforcement, their blood spattered across the pavements;



in the distance large, zeppelin-like aircraft hover ominously over the skyline, piercing light through the ashen skies down onto suspicious civilians. It's the closest you can get to an apocalypse without a nuclear bomb actually scorching the Earth's surface.

But while things aren't so sunny in Philadelphia right now, a sliver of hope remains. The game has you jumping between defiant resistance cells scattered across the city, where you complete objectives to shake the current Korean authority and inspire a coup d'état.

Starting in a ramshackle Molotov factory, we're given a run-through of one of the missions. Here you can craft resources to create makeshift weapons. Molotov cocktails are obviously the chef's speciality, but using an old RC car and a few other explosive chemicals, an IED is born. This will be used to infiltrate a police compound and disrupt the KPA presence in the area.

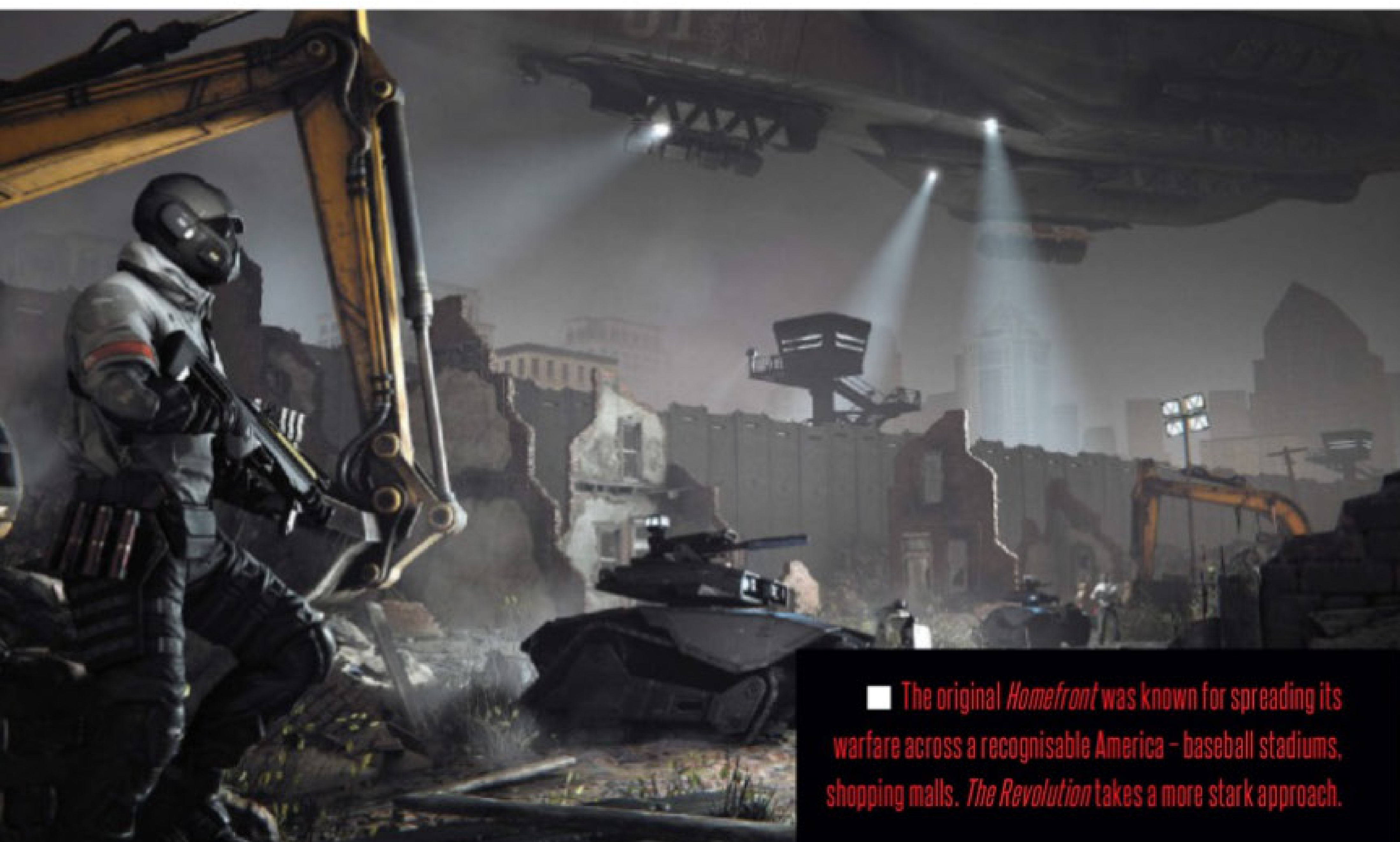
"Everything you do in the world has an impact on the revolution," explains Salim. "The stuff you do, no matter how small – whether that's smashing a camera or killing a KPA official – will have an impact on the uprising level, as we're calling it. The more things you do, the more significant things you do, the more that uprising level rises. Then people will start taking to the streets."

During this operation, there are four people leading the vanguard of rebellion in this particular district. We're told this is a simulated multiplayer experience, with the final game enabling players to join up with three friends and fight alongside each other in the same reactive sandbox as single-player – suggesting that it'll take a similar approach to the *Borderlands* series.

To successfully penetrate the locked-down police station, first the resistance must draw them out and avoid detection from the passing drones. One member of the party sets off a small explosion on the fringes of the area, which causes the KPA to send out a small unit to investigate. With no further disturbance to report, the troops return and the IED's on-board camera is used to direct the motorised bomb under one of the returning military vehicles and through the gates of the compound.

The bomb goes off, a firefight ensues and we're given a small glimpse at how the open-world shooter will enable players to both strategise and formulate plans to complete objectives, but also fight across vast open spaces. "That was one example of how to do that mission," comments Salim. "You could've also just sat back and picked everyone off from a distance with a sniper rifle. We have multiple routes into every area and space in the game. You can always find a side entrance or a hidden tunnel underneath."

But it's not just the layout of the environment that creates dynamic avenues of gameplay. The way that NPCs react organically to the events around them is fundamental to the game's guerrilla sensibilities. "We also have an emergent AI system – which is probably one of the most powerful features in the »



■ The original *Homefront* was known for spreading its warfare across a recognisable America – baseball stadiums, shopping malls. *The Revolution* takes a more stark approach.

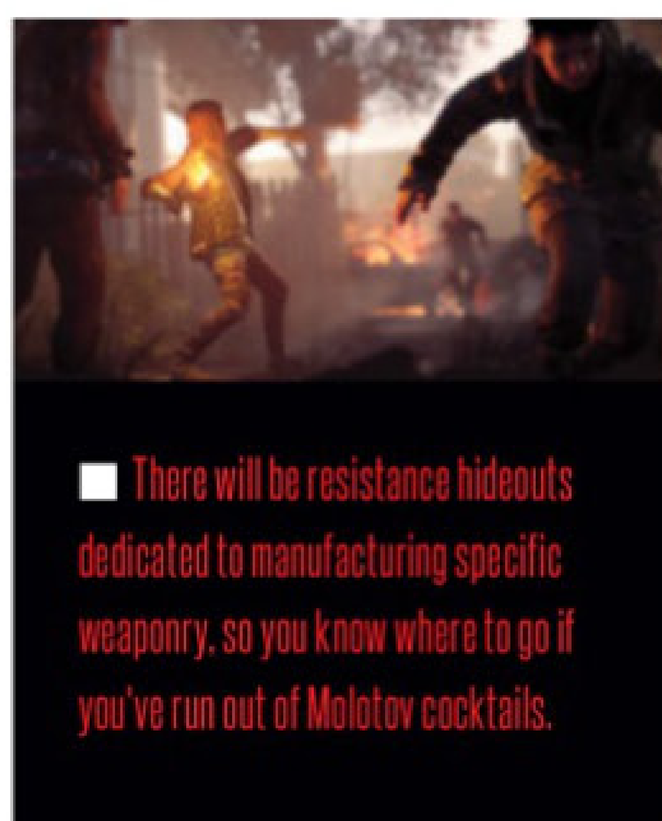
WHO IS CRYTEK UK?

A quick guide to the history of Crytek UK

■ FOUNDED: 1999 as Free Radical Design by former Rare employees David Doak, Steve Ellis, Karl Hilton, Graeme Norgate and Lee Ray (who all worked on the Nintendo 64 first-person shooters *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*). The studio's first game was the critically acclaimed *TimeSplitters*. While the brevity of its single-player campaign was criticised, the multiplayer component more than compensated – no surprise given the credentials of its team. It followed this with a superior sequel, *Second Sight* and a second *TimeSplitters* sequel. The studio struggled with middling sales and after the critical and commercial failure of the overhyped *Haze*, the studio found itself in financial turmoil after other projects were abruptly shut down (most notably, *Star Wars: Battlefront 3*). After entering administration, German developer Crytek (known for *Far Cry* and the *Crysis* series) stepped in and acquired the company, changing its name to Crytek UK and setting up new offices in Nottingham. Since then, Crytek UK has developed the multiplayer modes on both *Crysis 2* and *Crysis 3*. *Homefront: The Revolution* is the studio's first solo project under the Crytek banner.

» CryEngine," says Salim. "That allows us to set up scenarios that trail off into events we don't control. The idea behind the emergent system is that this world is living and breathing and things occur in the world whether you're present or not. In the presentation we showed you how we infiltrated the compound using the RC car. Another thing that could've happened was that a skirmish could've kicked off. You'll see a lot of skirmishes between the resistance and the KPA they just happen in certain places. That could've kicked off and it would've changed the dynamics in what you're trying to achieve on that particular mission. You didn't expect that to happen but you can use it to your advantage: that could be a potential distraction, taking out some of the guards that you needed to get through.

"It could've gotten even worse, though," he continues. "If you take that skirmish example, the KPA could've called in reinforcements that double the difficulty. All of a sudden there's unexpected KPA presence that you weren't expecting. The dynamics can change and can change randomly and that's something we have no control over. I think that'll lead to a lot of interesting situations that'll unfold for the player."


■ There will be resistance hideouts dedicated to manufacturing specific weaponry, so you know where to go if you've run out of Molotov cocktails.

Anyone who has played the original may notice that this sounds a far cry (sorry) from the Kaos Studio's linear A-to-B shooter. And although *The Revolution* is touted as an expansive free-roam first-person action game, its origins were more closely tied to that of its progenitor. "Before [Crytek] acquired the IP, we already started working on it with THQ," says Salim. "We'd done about a years worth of work and then obviously the THQ thing happened. That was a scary time. We didn't know what was happening. We were concerned that we were going to lose a year's worth of work. But then Crytek got the licence for us and not only did it save all the work that we did but it gave us the opportunity to expand on what we were doing."

The original plan was for *Homefront: The Revolution* to be a traditional level-to-level first-person shooter and much of the past 12 months work had been based around that concept. "What we really wanted to do was create a big free-roaming world," enthuses Salim. "For us it has been really exciting. It has given us a chance to work on a first-person shooter that is very different from a gameplay perspective. You're not in a Nanosuit, you don't have superpowers, you're not a hardened military soldier. It adds a lot of interesting situations and scenarios that we could work on."



"BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD? YEAH, WE HAD TO CHANGE A LOT OF THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES"
Fasahat Salim, Crytek UK

Not that the transition was easy. Talking to Salim, deciding to expand your game from a linear first-person shooter into a vast open-world experience isn't a case of flicking a switch, or dragging corners of the screen to enlarge the picture. To use a worn-out press release term, it was back to the drawing board for the Nottingham-based studio.

"We had a lot of content that has made it into the free-roam but it was a big transition," admits Salim. "When it was a level-to-level design, everything was contained to each stage, but

SEQUELS THAT ARE NOTHING LIKE THEIR ORIGINAL

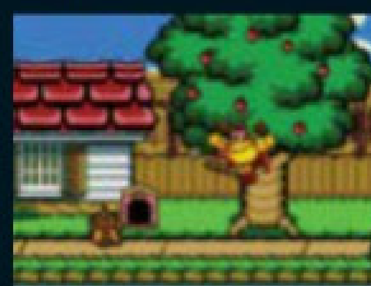
Homefront: The Revolution isn't the first game that bears little in common with its predecessor. Here are five more

ZELDA II: THE ADVENTURE OF LINK
Sequel To: The Legend of Zelda



■ NOT ONLY SHUCKING the top-down viewpoint of the original in favour of a side-scrolling approach, *Zelda II* also decided to drop the 'Legend' part of the title, just to distinguish itself further. Later sequels would be criticised for deviating from the tried-and-tested pathway but the series' first follow-up remains the biggest departure from the formula.

PAC-MAN 2: THE NEW ADVENTURES
Sequel To: Pac-Man



■ Rather than running around a maze gobbling up pills and avoiding the terrifying clutches of a gang of spectres, *Pac-Man 2: The New Adventures* has you playing as yourself, with the Pac-Man family. It's a puzzle game, enabling you to meet the series' extended cast and solve a few easy conundrums before tackling a giant gum monster. Luckily, it was back to form after this.

STAR FOX ADVENTURES
Sequel To: Lylat Wars



■ NOTORIOUSLY, *STAR FOX Adventures* started life as a completely different game, *Dinosaur Planet*. But after some creative disagreements, this ground-level adventure game was refitted as a sequel to the space-combat game *Lylat Wars*. It has more in common with *Zelda* than *Star Fox*, but McCloud et al proved not quite as much fun outside the Arwing.



■ While players are able to explore Philadelphia above ground, there will be a complex underground system that will connect many of the districts and house many of the resistance cells that you must rally to your cause.

when we went to free-roam we had to expand and adapt to this massive world; it needs to cover a whole lot of space and be fun consistently. There was a lot of re-thinking to be done. We did take a lot of the stuff we already worked on. But back to the drawing board? Yeah, we had to change a lot of the design principles. Designing a game as a linear first-person shooter and then designing a game as an open experience is a completely different kettle of fish."

There seems to be a trend in the industry right now for open-world games to shuck traditional real-world settings such as New York or Los Angeles in favour of something a little more outside the box. *Watch Dogs* has Chicago, *InFamous: Second Son* chose Seattle, and *Homefront: The Revolution* places its pin in the map right in the birthplace of US independence, Philadelphia.

While it lacks the grandeur and iconography of any of the aforementioned locations (although, it does boast Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell), it's an apt setting, not least for illustrating how far America has fallen. In the fiction of *Homefront: The Revolution*, the city is divided up into three zones: the Red Zone, the Yellow Zone and the Green Zone. Players are able to travel in and out of these areas freely, without being encumbered by load screens.

"The world is big, big, big," Salim boasts. " The Red Zone is a wasteland. It's full of bombed-out row houses and generally a neglected part of town the KPA don't want to go. It's the closest thing to the Wild West in 2029 Philadelphia. But it's also this is the place a lot of interesting things happen. It's a very expansive space."

It's here, Crytek UK tease, that the revolution will break out proper and, we suspect, the KPA will be drawn into fighting across.

"We've also got Yellow Zones," continues Salim. "This is the main space the KPA are trying to drive the population into. They have given people incentives to move to this area by giving away food rations and things like that. They want to bring as much of the population into these Yellow Zones because it's easier for them to control and keep an eye on them. They have their drones, they have their watchtowers and their cameras and that's where they can keep an eye on all the population and making sure no one is stepping over the lines."

There are several of these Yellow Zones across Philadelphia, which Salim describes as "ghettos" each with their own unique style and personality. "The Green Zone is where the main landmarks within Philadelphia are," says Salim. "The KPA have taken up these main opulent areas and set up their main headquarters there and housing. This is where they call their safe zone – this is their space. This has a completely different feel to the other zones."

While we're only given a tour around one of the Yellow Zones and a brief glimpse of the charred ruin of the Red Zone, it's clear that as your world map expands during your progression through the campaign, the studio has found a lot of visual and gameplay diversity to distinguish between each of the major districts in the game. But while these disparate pockets of society have been torn apart by the mad ruling of a despot, it's your job to unite them all to fight back against the KPA forces.

"What you want to do that throughout the whole world is to get everyone out on the streets together," says Salim. "One of the things that happens is that you can actually see the difference on the streets. People start coming out and that impacts the KPA as well because now they have something else to worry about. People are on the street rioting, they're angry and all of a sudden the KPA is distracted – they're worried about the rioters and need to suppress them." This offers distinct advantages to you as a player. With the KPA facing the other direction, you're able to circumvent their forces and sneak into enemy territory when they're most vulnerable. It's these moments of opportunity that demonstrate your own vulnerability. You're not a globe-trotting super soldier wearing a super-powered Nanosuit. You're an everyman: a bank worker or a taxi driver, a teacher or an accountant. Specifically, you're Ethan Brady. »

GUILTY GEAR 2: OVERTURE

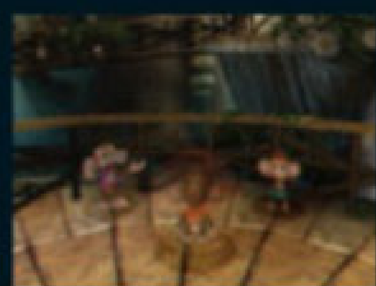
Sequel to: Guilty Gear



■ UP UNTIL *GUILTY Gear 2*, the series had mostly resembled *Street Fighter* in style. More than just a switch to 3D visuals, the seventh sequel took a radically different approach, opting for action-based gameplay similar to *Devil May Cry*, while mixing several other gameplay elements from other genres. It overhauled the entire essence of the franchise.

SUPER MONKEY BALL ADVENTURE

Sequel to: Super Monkey Ball



■ THE MONKEYS ARE still locked firmly inside their balls, but everything else about this sequel has completely changed. Gone is the hair-raising courses and finger-curling puzzles and in with plot and 3D platforming. It was an utter disaster and the series has since taken the wise decision to revert back to the hair-raising gameplay that earned it legions of fans.

■ Your mission is to rattle enough cages that the rest of the populace hit the streets to rebel against the KPA forces. This can be used as a distraction but also has the potential to up the difficulty with more KPA troops taking to the streets.



■ In the Red Zone, barely any life remains. This is where Crytek UK teases that a significant part of the resistance will take place.

» "He's an average everyday guy who gets drawn into this world of resistance and becoming a guerrilla fighter. You join him on the journey from him going from this normal everyday guy to becoming this guerrilla, resistance fighter and igniting this revolution," Salim tells **games™**. "That's the story that is driving the game – the journey of this guy going forward and becoming a pivotal figure in the revolution. Around that there's a whole world of content that is not necessarily driven by the story but is more about the environment and the experience of being a guerrilla fighter. As much as it's a story about this guy, it's also about being in an oppressive society and what it's like to live in those conditions."

For fans of Free Radical, the concept might seem more straightforward than what they might expect from the *TimeSplitters* studio. In fact, Crytek – who acquired the developer after it went into administration and renamed it Crytek UK – might just have rubbed off some of its own inimitable style on the Nottingham team. First and foremost is the best-in-class tools in the industry at Crytek UK's disposal.

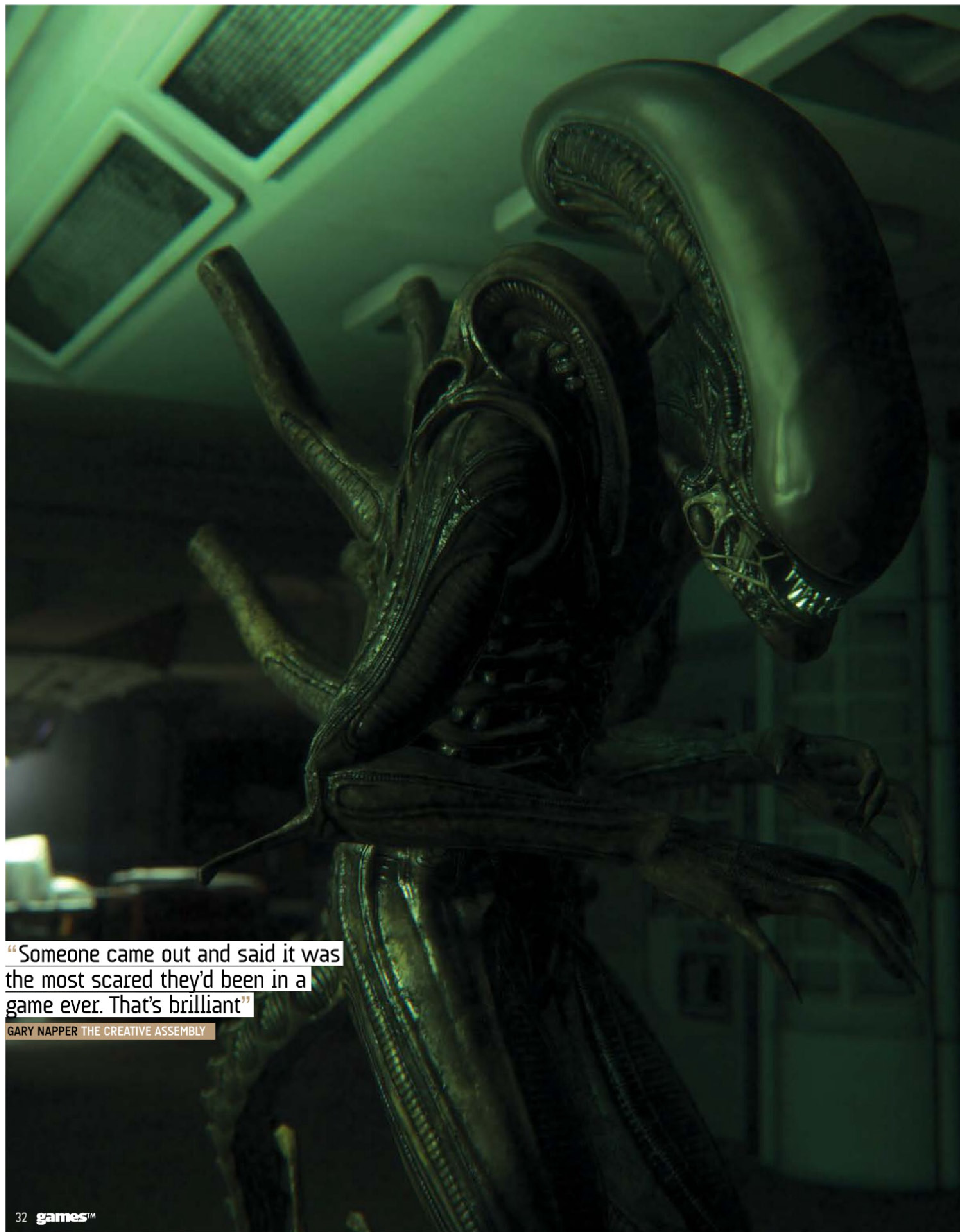
"At Crytek we have the benefit of having some of the best tech around," beams Salim. "It gives us so much flexibility in what we can achieve. We also have the R&D department in the UK, so we can always go and take a feature to them and get them to test it out – stuff that we haven't even thought of before." There are other little nods to Crytek's stylistic heritage. The way the player can customise a gun is straight out of *Crysis*, while there's clearly structural similarities in how each miniature sandbox has been designed. It appears that, under the wing of the German developer, Crytek UK has not only benefitted from utilising the celebrated game engine but also from the creative partnership.

"There are a lot of different things," replies Salim when we quiz him on how Free Radical's sensibilities have married with Crytek's own. "As to what we've been doing as Free Radical and what we're doing now at Crytek, obviously we started off our journey in the company as console multiplayer developers – that's what we did on *Crysis 2* and *Crysis 3*. To have this as our first proper project with all of Crytek's support and technology at our hands, it has been a great experience for all of us and a lot of fun. We've been as open with our ideas and expansive as possible without having many restrictions. There's a lot of cool stuff we never thought we'd be able to get into a game. It's exciting."

What's important though is that *Homefront: The Revolution* maintains its own identity. It might be a Crytek title, but the team behind it clearly has a strong desire to create something unlike anything it has worked on before. It also wants to offer a unique perspective on a concept that felt recycled to begin with. It wants to be a sequel that isn't really a sequel. So if the original *Homefront* was *Red Dawn*, then what is *Homefront: The Revolution*? Salim laughs. "I believe," he pauses, mulling over the question. "I believe that *Homefront: The Revolution* is whatever the player wants it to be."



Homefront: The Revolution is out on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One in 2015.



"Someone came out and said it was the most scared they'd been in a game ever. That's brilliant"

GARY NAPPER THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

Alien: Isolation

CONCEPT ■ Underprepared, overwhelmed and alone, players will take Amanda Ripley through the space station Sevastopol. Though admittedly when we said 'alone', we may have been lying

In space, no one can hear you overuse taglines

Getting to see a bit more of *Alien: Isolation* is a double-edged experience. On one hand, you get to get to grips with more of what is looking like it could well be an excellent game, sneaking about a beautifully-realised world and soaking in that thick, *Alien*-y atmosphere. On the other hand, it's absolutely terrifying. Being stalked by that eight-foot-tall perfect killing machine isn't pleasant – and now we've seen the human (and synthetic) enemies you have to face off against, or avoid if you like. It could well be overwhelming.

But at the same time it's just three types of threat – won't it be boring eventually? Gary Napper, lead designer on *Isolation*, says no: "I think the thing we face mostly on this is when we explain the core idea of 'It's you versus the Alien', people go 'That'll be amazing! But I'm going to be bored after three hours'… If you can extrapolate from at the beginning having nothing and it's just you hiding from the Alien, to come up to what [we've shown so far] – and then extend that out for another while – there's actually a hell of a lot we do with the game that's really interesting. And obviously we like to mix it up a bit as well." It's the question that the studio gets asked more than any other: how do you maintain a high level of tension throughout a whole campaign?

/// "I think the craft to it is getting the mechanics right," answers Napper. "[It's] having enough mechanics that are varied enough to keep the player interested, teaching them in a specific order and then once they're used to them changing it up. If you think about that as a design approach and then apply it to the behaviour set of the Alien… when you first meet the Alien you can't do much and you don't have access to many things. Then as you find devices and find things in the environment, he then is able to react to those things and change to those. The player feels like they're able to deal with the Alien at last, then the Alien adapts to that."

A key principle in its development is not just a reliance on the nostalgia value of the licence. While there's plenty of slavish attention being paid to replicating the world that Ridley Scott first established back in 1979, all the infinitesimal detail serves a gameplay purpose rather than just pandering to fan service. "One of the examples I like to use is that after the Eighties and Nineties films got a lot more CG-based because it was cheaper to make impressive visual effects," explains Napper. "But I really love the feel of those films from the Seventies and Eighties, where stuff was real – if they wanted a self-destruct system they made it, and it was made out of old parts of a Vulcan Bomber they found at old RAF bases, and when you see Sigourney Weaver pull the lever down on the self destruct she's actually struggling to do that, because it's a real piece of machinery, you can hear it creaking – that's what we want to represent in the game. I think it's a very important part of the world."

That's not to say that the game ignores the established *Alien* lore that has come before it – well, the good parts at least (sorry *Alien: Colonial Marines*). It lifts much of its narrative from information gleamed from the background of both Scott's original and James Cameron's 1986 sequel. The premise has Ellen Ripley's daughter Amanda venturing onto the space station Sevastopol in search of the flight recorder belonging to her mother's missing ship Nostromo. While there, she'll encounter the same horrific entity that stalked the Ripley before her. "We always want to make sure the things we're touching on are considered canon within the universe," explains Napper, elaborating on Fox's involvement in the game. "We're making sure we don't do anything that wouldn't fit. We've worked very closely with 20th Century Fox, we send them regular updates, they come over and see us to play the game and provide feedback – it's a tight feedback loop."

Another way in which *Isolation* aims to keep players interested is its emergent nature. Sitting in a room among a dozen other journalists, we were witness to more than a dozen subtly different ways of tackling a

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: England
Publisher: Sega
Developer: The Creative Assembly
Release: October 7
Genre: Survival horror
Players: 1

Alien History

There have been *Alien* games almost as long as there have been *Alien* films, with the first coming out in 1982 on the Atari 2600. A *Pac-Man/Frogger* rip-off, it was only marginally worse than 2013's *Colonial Marines*. This is a series of tie-ins that has had some major ups and downs.

Developer History

Total War: Rome II **2013 [PC]**
Viking: Battle for Asgard **2008 [PS3/Xbox 360/PC]**
Medieval: Total War **2002 [PC]**
Stunt Car Racer **1989 [PC]**

High Point

Thinking of the studio's console output, rather than its excellent PC games, the high point has to be *Viking*. Long-winded and plodding it was, but also exciting and hilariously violent.

■ While initial emphasis for *Isolation* was on the 'one woman with a motion tracker' angle, *Isolation* does indeed feature weapons and other gadgets. The thing is, you don't actually have to use them – sometimes it makes sense not to, in fact.

challenge. The majority of which lead players down a path filled with its own subset of unnerving imagery – watching one player use a flamethrower against a malevolent android is a particularly unsettling sight. It's something Napper and the team are very proud of.

"The mission structure is something we built around the idea of the station being a real place. There's too many games where it's a linear experience and, for example, you walk through a door, it closes behind you and you can't go back through it. Why is that?

"As you progress through the station and unlock more areas you can always go back to the areas you've been through. A big part of that was making sure that when you go back there's still things going on, so it didn't feel like 'I've done this area, I'll be fine' – the Alien can actually be anywhere… It's very much a metroidvania style of unlocking things."

The introduction of human/human-ish enemies was cause for concern with many, however, fearing *Isolation* could drop its survival horror trappings and go full-on shooter. There are weapons in the game – we've seen the aforementioned flamethrower used to neutralise an enemy target – but Napper alleviates such fears of 'dumbing-down': "You can get through the entire game without killing someone," he enthuses. "It's something that was, not so much a challenge, but something I felt was what the character would do. We're talking about a member of the Ripley family – they're not like characters in games that gun down civilians because they're in the way to get to the switch."

"We didn't want to give the player plasma grenades or super-lasers and stuff like that"

GARY NAPPER THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

/// To get by without killing everyone, *Isolation* has Ripley using some delightfully retro-futuristic tech. It's useful, and you *will* die without the motion tracker, but there are no magic bullets or all-seeing eyes. "It's only 2D," Napper said of the iconic (shoddy) radar device, "It's those kinds of things that give you a lot of gameplay – you're tracking the Alien or a human or whatever, they could be on the floor below you, they could be in the ducts above you, they could be behind the wall – you're never totally sure where these things are." Rather than a cheap technique to scare you more, it's an aesthetic element that makes total sense – and in turn makes the game that bit more panic-inducing.

"We've been very grounded in our approach to designing a lot of the mechanics because we didn't want to give the player plasma grenades or super-lasers and stuff like that," says Napper. "One of the rules we've said is, if you and I were stuck in a shopping mall and there was an Alien in there, what would we make? What could we possibly craft to defend ourselves?

"I could probably make some kind of Molotov cocktail – you know how to do that, I know how to do that. But say we're engineers, then we could do a bit more, maybe we'd make something that could make a lot of noise and I could definitely grab a big stick. It's that kind of approach to designing the mechanics you'd use in the environment, so it would feel like this stuff is real, that this is the set we can naturally use. I think it's a lot to do with that."

Whatever our feeling on *Alien: Isolation* so far (spoiler: it's looking great), there's an undeniable truth about its development – those making it are having fun. Napper agreed: "It's definitely an opportunity – how often do you get to make that game you've always wanted to play? People can go their entire career without doing that. Everyone's been really happy to join this team and get a chance to be a part of it."

The only fear was that the studio would be beaten to the punch. "You rewind three years and the team thought 'No one's ever made the game of that film, no one's ever made that survival horror experience – being underpowered against a single terrifying Alien. Let's make that'," Napper remembers. "I don't know whether it's naive or not but that's the thing we've always wanted to play and we've got the chance to make it, so very little else has an effect on that.

"What we were most nervous about was that somebody else could do this before us," he continues. "We've been making this in relative secrecy for about three years, and all of that time we see forums and people describing the type of *Alien* games they'd like to play – some people hit the nail on the head. And you're like 'Yep!' trying not to hit that reply button and scream 'We're making this!' But that was the only real fear, that someone else might get there before us. It's been great to see people play the section we've got – someone came out and said it was the most scared they'd been in a game ever. That's brilliant."





Above: *Isolation* is dark and claustrophobic – it won't satisfy blue sky enthusiasts – but there's a genuine beauty to the game. Right: You cannot fight the Alien – this is made as abundantly clear as much as possible, probably to head off complaints of unfairness.



Above: The Creative Assembly has done an astonishing job at making every inch of the Sevastopol an incredibly creepy place to walk around.

FOXY BOXING

THOSE WHO PAY attention to licensed properties will know that 20th Century Fox has a bit of a reputation for sticking its oar in – understandably, as they own these things and should have their say. But Napper says this time around, Fox has been hands-off, largely leaving CA to their devices. "We always joke that actually we are our own harshest critics – we look at something and say 'Nah, that's not *Alien*, that's not going in the game'. We have that kind of approach to it. So in some ways we're almost more stringent on ourselves than Fox are. I think we've got a good level of trust between us – they've seen the level of quality we're able to hit and the type of experience we've created."





■ Left: It isn't just the Alien that Ripley has to get past – humans are on the station, along with their 'artificial humans'. They're not friendly, but they can prove very useful in situations where a large, human-eating beast is tracking its next prey.
Below: Watching others play the game is almost as tense as playing it yourself, with everyone collectively praying the terrifying beast doesn't notice the player.





IT'S COMING

ALONGSIDE THE latest gameplay reveal of *Alien: Isolation*, Creative Assembly has finally announced the release date for the game: 7 October. It shows a remarkable amount of confidence in the title, placing it at the start of the holiday season up against *Evolve*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and its genre contemporary *The Evil Within*. "We couldn't be happier to finally announce a date for *Alien: Isolation*," Creative Assembly's Alistair Hope said. "The reaction we have seen so far has been simply incredible, from the screams and shrieks to the cold sweats and racing hearts. It's the *Alien* game that we've always wanted to play and we can't wait to let everyone get their hands on it."

PLAYER PERFORMANCE

■ WHILE THE visual effect is startlingly, adding a genuine sense of grandeur and energy to the action, these emotions don't actually play into a player's performance. An angry David Luiz or Luis Suárez will perform, whether under the control of the player or the AI, in the exact same way as a level-headed alter ego.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Canada
Release: 19 November
Genre: TBA
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Based just outside of Vancouver, British Columbia, EA Canada's roots can be traced all the way back to 1983. EA's biggest studio, with roughly 1,300 employees, it is most famous for developing the *NHL* and *FIFA* franchises. It is, however, constantly adding to its portfolio, most recently with the upcoming *EA Sports UFC*.

High Point

FIFA 14
The first in the long-running series to appear on next-gen consoles, represents the pinnacle of the world's most successful sports videogame, delivering the most diverse game mode options and slickest visuals.

Developer History

2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil **2014 [Multi]**
FIFA 14 **2013 [Multi]**
NHL 14 **2013 [Multi]**
FIFA 13 **2012 [Multi]**

NEW TACTICS

THERE ARE, however, new elements and improvements designed to overtly alter how players do perform in comparison to *FIFA 14*. AI is being completely reworked, most notably in how the opposition's mentality changes throughout the course of a game. If a team finds themselves a goal down with just ten minutes to go, they now throw every attacking option they have at you.

ON THE BALL

THE PHYSICS controlling the ball movement are being radically reworked, too. Where and how hard a player's foot touches the ball now directly determines the spin and power of all passes and shots, resulting in you being able to more readily use the pace on a corner or free-kick to redirect a header goalwards.

FIFA 15 CONCEPT

FIFA 15's primary addition is an 'emotion' system designed to replicate the highs, the lows and the turmoil players experience during a real match

Footballers are people too, right?

Providing players with the ability to 'feel the game' is the overarching goal of EA Canada's latest attempt at portraying the beautiful game as accurately as possible in digital form. For the first time in the series, the emphasis here is on having footballers actually seem like real human beings.

Primarily, this will be achieved by having players show their emotions and reacting much more obviously and realistically to match events both major and minor. Every player now has an emotional underpinning that alters based on their current situation, past events and the actions of those around them. If an attacker believes a penalty should be awarded, for example, they will race to the referee, arms raised in appeal and claiming injustice in a bid to sway any decision in their favour. If a defender has been part of a vicious, goal-long, foul-ridden encounter with an opponent they're more likely to push and shove and generally show dissatisfaction towards their nemesis whenever they're in close proximity.

The same approach applies to teammates, too. An early missed shot from a striker might be met with applause from their own team in a bid to encourage them to try again, but too many misses can turn applause to derision.

All of these reactions are exaggerated or muted depending on the match. If the league title is on the line, expect tension to shine through. If it's a meaningless, end of season mid-table clash between two teams with nothing to play for then reactions will be generally minor. In *FIFA 15*, emotions will run high.



Right: Two-time Academy Award-winner Kevin Spacey has delivered full face and motion capture to his part as Jonathan Irons. We are finally heading for uncanny valley – the model looks incredibly life-like. Spacey's inclusion is proof that videogames are finally ready to challenge Hollywood as the premier form of entertainment.



WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

FOLLOWING THE successful ship of *Dead Space*, and the formation of Sledgehammer Games, the studio was picked by Activision to develop an entirely new type of *Call Of Duty* experience. Not an First-person shooter, but a third-person action adventure game that is set in the conflicts of Vietnam. There is a playable twenty-minute demo, which is under lock and key at Activision, though it is unlikely that we will ever get to see it in action now – following the almost collapse of Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer was brought in to help get *Modern Warfare 3* out of the door on time. Activision was so impressed with the studio's work that it made it the third pillar of the *Call Of Duty* annual cycle machine. Here's to hoping that it lives up to our expectations.





Right: Sledgehammer is working on the PS4 and Xbox One versions. Little is known about the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions, though it is understood that High Moon Studios will take over.









Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare

CONCEPT ■ The theatre of war has shifted once again as Sledgehammer Games makes its solo debut with *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, the first truly next-gen instalment into the blockbuster franchise.

Does Activision have the ambition to reclaim the throne?

This November, Activision is going to war. The publisher has never been afraid of embracing the future with the *Call Of Duty* franchise, and *Advanced Warfare* is a very significant statement of intent. When we began to feel the fatigue of World War II, Infinity Ward reinvigorated the series and pushed us into *Modern Warfare*. When Treyarch was left to pick itself out IW's shadow, *Black Ops* was the result. With the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One upon us, it's time for a new guiding hand. Activision is bringing the series forward once again, entrusting *Call Of Duty* to developer Sledgehammer Games – a studio with a bold vision for the future of the franchise.

Sledgehammer isn't content with being the third wheel. Co-development on *Modern Warfare 3* was the proving grounds and now, as the studio pushes *Call Of Duty* into 2052, *Advanced Warfare* will be its debut on the global stage. Of course, a setting change isn't enough anymore. The shift isn't just an excuse for the studio to introduce new weaponry and technology into play, but an opportunity to deliver a narrative with real-world weight in ways DICE has only dreamt about. The studio has carried out an exhaustive amount of research on future technology to make *Advanced Warfare* as authentic as possible. This isn't a theatre of war lazily fought by robots and lasers – it's a projection of a very real, and very terrifying future.

/// The setting and its technology is more deeply integrated into gameplay than anything we've seen from the franchise before. Soldiers come equipped with Exo suits that augment strength and agility: that's going to allow the player to do everything from leaping vast distances, hovering in the air and lifting impossibly heavy objects, to runing faster and scaling buildings. The suit is the mechanical backbone of *Advanced Warfare*. It is not only providing a welcomed change to the balance and pace of gameplay, but it will continue to expand the ways in which players will interact with *Call Of Duty* as a base-experience. Maps will need to become more open-ended to accommodate for the new mobility and pace of players. AI will need to improve massively should they want to stand any chance against your advanced tactical opportunities and impressive weaponry. The state of play is shifting, and we couldn't be happier to see Sledgehammer taking risks with the biggest franchises in the industry.

The Exo is also fully upgradable in the single player campaign. It's this openness of systems that will set *Advanced Warfare* apart from the two other universes housed under the brand. If you want to revel in utilising electro adhesion gloves (*Mission Impossible 4*-style) to scale cover and buildings, then you can absolutely tailor the game to suit that play-style. Should you fancy your hand at stealth, then the Exo suit also has cloaking capabilities for you to enhance with your EXP. The influence of EA's *Crysis* is running deeply through *Advanced Warfare*'s DNA.

Advanced Warfare is aiming to become sleeker and more versatile than its immediate competition. The future weaponry is something to behold, from a rifle that 3D prints bullets to grenades that alter their function in the heat of the moment. The aforementioned rifle is a great example; players can load in a canister of liquid matter and wait for the gun's internal computer to begin printing ammunition on the spot. Cooking a grenade will cycle through functions, from frag to thermal – which will feed local enemy positions directly into your HUD. This is all weaponry in development now, and Sledgehammer has spent the better part of three years speaking with engineers, scientists, PMC groups and government officials to make this experience as authentic as possible.

Sledgehammer is going a step further than Infinity Ward and Treyarch ever dared. The studio isn't just looking to change the status quo, it's looking to completely destroy it with superior weaponry and tactics.

> "It's been a lot of fun working with the team to bring Jonathan Irons to life. The technology is truly remarkable and unlike anything I've done before"
>
> KEVIN SPACEY

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Sledgehammer Games
Release: 4 November 2014 (Japan: TBC/US: 04/11/2014)
Genre: First-person shooter
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Sledgehammer Games was founded by former EA developers Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey, who first worked together on 2005's *007: From Russia With Love*. The duo would later work on *Dead Space*, the tense survival horror in space, and quit the company shortly after the game went gold. Schofield set out with the intention of building a brand new studio, farming former Visceral Games developers and industry veterans to come together and build the future of the *Call Of Duty* franchise for Activision.

Developer History

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
2011 [Multi]

High Point

Activision asked Sledgehammer to work a miracle when it looked like *Modern Warfare 3* wouldn't make its release date, but the studio stepped up and helped Infinity Ward. It might not be the best game in the trilogy, but it showed the first signs of the franchise evolving its multiplayer and single-player systems.

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel

CONCEPT ■ A prequel set between the original Borderlands and its 2012 sequel, the game uses its new space setting as a unique gameplay hook.

games™ talks to Tiffany Nagano, 2K producer

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Australia
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: 2K Australia, Gearbox Software
Release: Late 2014
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Everyone knows who Gearbox Software is but a lot less is known about 2K Australia. This outfit has worked on a number of major 2K titles, including each *BioShock Infinite* and *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified* – after it merged with 2K Marin for the latter. It has separated once again to work on the *Borderlands* prequel.

Developer History

BioShock Infinite
2013 [Multi]
The Bureau: XCOM Declassified
2013 [Multi]
BioShock 2
2010 [Multi]
Freedom Force
2002 [PC]

High Point

The studio worked alongside 2K Marin on the criminally underrated *BioShock 2*: a superlative and inventive sequel.

Space isn't the final frontier for Gearbox Software's *Borderlands* series but it'll certainly make do before it gets there. The self-titled 'Pre-Sequel' is utilising the outer reaches of the universe as the fulcrum for which insanity will continue to orbit in the series' inimitable way, with anti-gravity and other such far-flung concepts tossed into the mixing pot of contemptible characters, outlandish weaponry and unprecedented style. **games™** chats to producer Tiffany Nagano about why *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* needed to exist in the first place.

Why did you decide to create a 'pre-sequel' rather than a straight continuation of the *Borderlands* franchise?

2K and Gearbox felt that Handsome Jack deserved his own story, and fans have been clamouring for more *Borderlands* content. We wanted players to experience playing on Handsome Jack's side in order to watch him transform from a man intending to protect Pandora into the megalomaniacal tyrant he ultimately becomes. And of course, the moon setting is perfect for a range of new gameplay experiences, including low-gravity, laser guns and Cryo weapons.

What makes Handsome Jack such an endearing character and why tell his origin?

Jack is the megalomaniacal tyrant everyone loved to hate in *Borderlands 2*, but he wasn't always that way. *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* charts his rise to power, and allows players to explore his past and discover how and why he became this way.

Let's talk new weapons: was that a particularly enjoyable creative process?

Definitely. In *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, it's not just about adding more weapons – though we've done that – it's about adding new elements and

■ Inset: What would *Borderlands* be without the masses of loot to be found along the road? Nothing, that's what. We expect space to be littered with it.

■ Inset: Numbers! Numbers everywhere! *Borderlands* is still about racking up the points and progressing through the level-up system.

> "Jack is the megalomaniacal tyrant everyone loved to hate in Borderlands 2, but he wasn't always that way"
> TIFFANY NAGANO, 2K GAMES



classes too. There are new elemental damage types, such as Cryo, which means ice and freezing enemies, and a new weapon class – lasers – which adds a layer of strategy to the shoot 'n' loot gameplay that *Borderlands* fans know and love.

How are you expanding travelling, transport and vehicles given the new setting?

At PAX East, we showed a glimpse of the Stingray, a new hover bike vehicle. There's more to be said about that, but for now our lips are sealed!

What has the new setting enabled you to do to expand the central game mechanics?

The moon has low gravity, a limited oxygen supply and zero-atmosphere, which has a big impact on combat. These new elements create scenarios where a player can use their oxygen tank as air-bursts to propel their character forward over long distances, use double jumps and ground slams, or float high up off of the moon's surface. Paying attention to the vertical space becomes really important in high-flying gunfights. Enemies will also have oxygen helmets that, when shot off, causes damage over time. Oxygen domes are also found throughout the maps, so determining whether or not oxygen is present can change your approach to combat, and even how various weapon elements like fire work.

You now have to loot air to stay alive in space. Did you think that mechanic might be divisive?

We don't think that will be the case. Scarcity of oxygen is a concept so closely linked to being on the moon that we thought it would be a missed opportunity not to include this kind of unique gameplay challenge. Oxygen is a lootable item in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, but players can also activate oxygen generators to create domes of breathable atmosphere around certain areas. On top of that, when equipped with certain Oz kits, players can even create a smaller oxygen dome around them after doing a 'Slam'. We think that the combination of these elements adds a layer to the game that is different from the others in the *Borderlands* series.

Can you talk about your role collaborating with 2K Australia and how the process of handing the franchise over to another developer has been?

What I've seen from the publishing side is that it's been a fully collaborative effort between both Gearbox and 2K Australia, with development balanced between the two studios. Gearbox is excited about the opportunity to partner with 2K Australia, and tap into their talent and expert support in co-development they gained while working on the *BioShock* franchise. 2K Australia has always been huge fans of the franchise, and is thrilled to be co-developing *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* alongside Gearbox.



Inset: You'll have to loot oxygen as well in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* to stay alive. But will the concept alienate some fans of the series?

A TELLTALE SIGN

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel isn't the only *Borderlands* title currently in development. From the studio behind *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us* adaptations, *Tales From the Borderlands* is an episodic adventure game from the lauded Telltale Games. Players assume the role of Rhys, a low-level data-miner within Hyperion, and Fiona, a slick con-artist born and raised on Pandora. While neither are notorious vault hunters, they'll bump into Zer0 and other characters from the franchise. Telltale has released the first batch of screenshots but expect to hear more about how the studio will expand Gearbox's universe in the coming months…

Above: Aside from the new units and behind-the-scenes tweaks, this is just another slice of *Company Of Heroes 2*. That's not a bad thing, per se, but it's firmly in the realms of an expansion, rather than a full-on sequel.

Company Of Heroes 2: The Western Front Armies

CONCEPT ■ A standalone expansion for *Company Of Heroes 2*, bringing the action away from the Eastern Front and back to Western territory

Go west: life is peaceful now. Except for the war

T*he Western Front Armies* is an expansion to *Company Of Heroes 2* that makes the game more like the original *Company Of Heroes* and doesn't require a copy of *COH2* to play. Confused yet? But according to Quinn Duffy, game director on the *COH* franchise, this isn't simply going back to what's come before. "They're not retreads or re-skins of what we've done in the past – they're brand new designs, with some familiar units based on World War II history, some new units with tactical abilities we've not seen before." Players can choose to purchase either of the armies individually, or pick up the whole package together – either way they get their hands on a multiplayer-focused slice of RTS gaming that is, in the most part, very much the same as *Company Of Heroes 2*.

But, as Duffy explained, there have been a lot of changes since the 2013 release, with around 20 updates to the core game and its backend technology. This means *Western Front Armies* is building on a solid foundation – one that has taken good advantage of telemetry data gathered from *COH2* players. "Obviously what comes to mind immediately is how we use it for balance," Duffy said, "not only in the overall level of how the armies are balanced, but how they're balanced on specific maps and skill levels, or on one-versus-one or two-versus-two. You can get into a lot of detail, and though it doesn't give us any magic bullets or specific answers, it allows us to ask questions and then we can dig in.

"Then we can make a change and literally within hours see an impact on the telemetry and how the balance is adjusting. It's a great tool for us to analyse how the game's playing, where there are challenges, look at a fix and see if it has an impact. And you can do that in a really quick iteration."

> "Things come and go, genres are cyclical, and we might be experiencing an uptick in strategy again"
> QUINN DUFFY, RELIC ENTERTAINMENT



Above: US troops are capable of striking fast in numbers and escaping again. The Germans, however, rely on brute force and veteran ranks to overpower their opponents. It's surprisingly true to how things were towards the end of 1944.





OCULUS OF HEROES?

IT HAD TO be asked: could Duffy see *Company Of Heroes* working with Oculus? Probably not… "We always look at the new tech. I think you could move strategy to a lot of different platforms, but you'd have to distance yourself a little bit from what has been done. I think there's new ways of interpreting what a strategy game is on different platforms," he says. "We thought a lot about this kind of stuff with console, with touch… there's some cool concepts around that, around how strategy games play on these laptops and some of these very powerful tablets. It'd be a really neat way of engaging with the battlefield. We need to be forward thinking and we also need to be reactive as trends change, as tastes change."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: June 24
Genre: RTS
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Relic is one of the few remaining RTS-focused studios out there, with a history stretching back all the way to the much-loved (now Gearbox-owned) *Homeworld*. The Canadian studio has stepped outside strategic confines a few times – as with *The Outfit* – but generally speaking its games are for thinkers.

Developer History

Company Of Heroes 2 **2013 [PC]**
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine **2011[Multi]**
Homeworld **1999 [PC]**

High Point

Homeworld – and its 2003 sequel – is still regarded as one of the finest examples in the RTS genre. Beautiful, haunting, tragic and a lot of fun, it's still worth a pop today.

/// This process of iteration isn't just a new way of doing things for *Company Of Heroes* – it's a new way of working for Relic as a whole. As Duffy explained: "I've been there for 16 years and I think we've done more to change our processes and our mindset in the last six months than we have in the last ten years. We've really embraced that concept of games as a service and embraced our metrics, using them to inform what we do and how we test. There's a real excitement in the team around that because there's validation in getting your work out, and there's validation in seeing it get accepted or challenged and adapting, adjusting and being flexible in how you build the game."

'Games as a service' makes you think it's all done on the side of Relic, but there's a big push this time around for user-generated content to back up the core experience, as Duffy said: "I think when they spend time in the game there's a level of investment that they have personally that encourages that kind of stuff. We need to provide them a stable environment and a guarantee that we're going to support the game – if they're going to invest their time, we're going to invest our time. We can develop a really fantastic relationship with our community and that's something we want to build."

But what about Relic itself – this is one of the few big studios still flying the flag for the RTS genre. Is that something to be proud of? Duffy thinks so: "It can be a really good niche. There's always the challenge of 'How do we take these games mass market?' I don't think we'll ever see 32 million players – it'd be awesome – but I think there can be a very strong, effective niche and a great place for us to be.

"Things come and go, genres are cyclical, and we might be experiencing an uptick in strategy again – it'd be really nice for Relic to be owning World War II strategy."





Above: Western Front Armies comes with eight new maps to play on, as well as 23 from *COH2* and thousands made by fellow players. Below: As well as veteran players, Relic is hoping *Western Front Armies* will bring in a batch of brand new players.

1

2

Risen 3: Titan Lords

CONCEPT The series' return to oldschool role-playing sensibilities, the priority here is skill and challenge over the first sequel's accessibility

Searching for its soul

The *Risen* franchise has undergone a bit of an identity crisis across just three entries to date. The first in the series was a straightforward role-playing game that established an involving fantasy lore as the backbone to its adventure. The sequel, *Risen 2: Dark Waters*, diluted some of the more complex and engaging elements of the original and adopted a swashbuckling premise. Now the recently announced third instalment, *Risen 3: Titan Lords*, is switching the setting back to the medieval theme and has its eyes firmly locked on the hardcore gamer. Developer Piranha Bytes admits that the sequel wont be as polished or feature heavy as a lot of its genre contemporaries, but what it hopes to offer is a RPG in the classic sense, one that doesn't hold gamers by the hand and prioritises challenge over accessibility. Do we have another *Dark Souls* on our hands? There's certainly the potential for it to go that way.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Piranha Bytes
Release: 15 August
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Hailing from Germany, Piranha Bytes has been steadily gaining a reputation as the purveyor of classic role-playing values. Risen has been gradually growing in acclaim with every subsequent release, while Piranha Bytes has consistently proved itself as a unique force outside the mainstream.

Developer History

Risen 2: Dark Waters **2012 [Multi]**
Risen **2009 [PC, Xbox 360]**
Gothic 3 **2006 [PC]**
Gothic **2001 [PC]**

High Point

The original *Risen* established a solid backbone of fantasy lore and matched it with an inventive approach to the genre. Hopefully its second sequel can build on the success of its progenitor.

1 BACK TO ITS ROOTS

ONE PRINCIPLE THAT was of fundamental importance throughout the development of *Risen 3* was that it would return to the gameplay tenets of the original. This means a renewed focus on crystal magic – which is one of the core fighting abilities – as well as armour and other more technical mechanics. And while it hasn't abandoned the pirate theme altogether, the setting has more in common with the first *Risen*, with a medieval approach to its aesthetics, offering plenty of forests and ruins to explore.



3



4

5



"Like a carpenter with a hand-crafted piece of furniture, we put together the story, the characters and the landscape until it all fits"

BJOERN PANKRATZ PIRANHA BYTES

2 SOUL OF RISEN

RISEN 2: DARK WATERS tweaked its central systems to create a more accessible and action-orientated approach compared to its predecessor, and while it wasn't a disaster by any means, there's little question that *Dark Waters*' reach exceeded its grasp. For its sequel, the developer has looked at the current trend for experiences entrenched in challenge and skill. The studio cites *Dark Souls* and *Spelunky* as major influences during the development of *Titan Lords* – two titles known for their punishing difficulty. While we doubt Piranha will be quite so committed to the hardcore sensibilities of the aforementioned title, but either way the bar has been set very high.

3 A FIGHTING CHANCE

COMBAT HAS RECEIVED the most significant update in *Titan Lords*. A lot more emphasis has been placed on chaining combos together and timing is paramount to successfully taking down enemies – once again, the influence of *Dark Souls* shines through. On a more technical level you're now able to block and counter-attack moves, while you're also able to dodge attacks with a new roll manoeuvre. It seems insignificant but each enhancement to the core systems makes *Risen 3* a more competent competitor in the RPG genre.

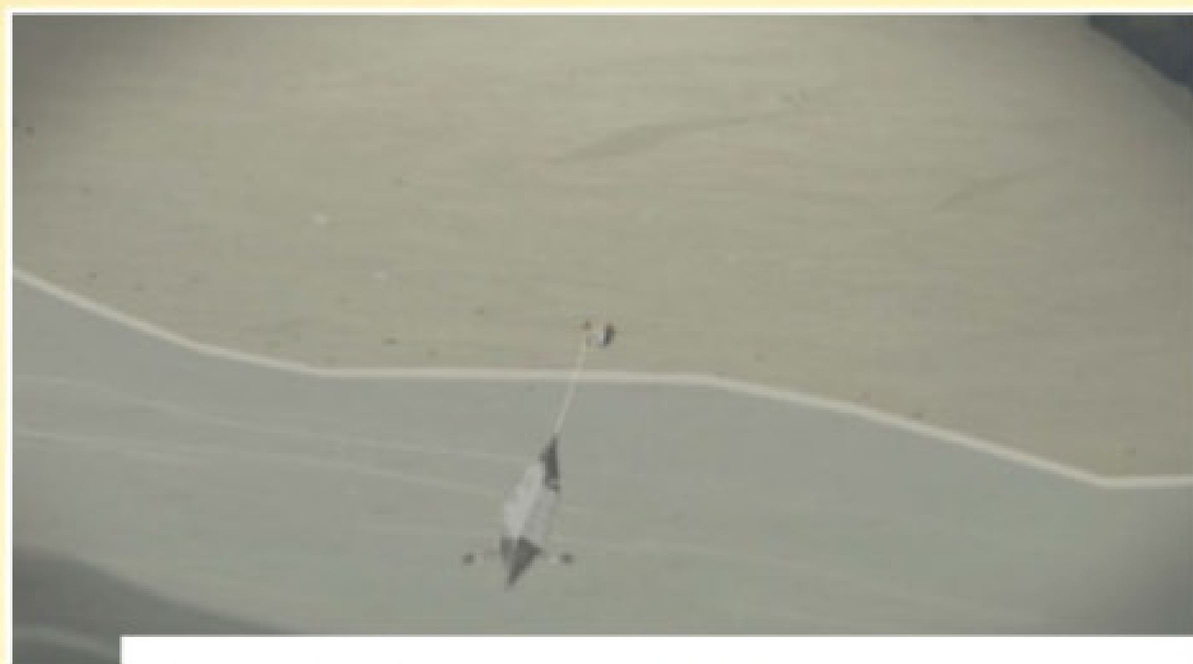
4 A BETTER VIEW

THE RISEN SERIES is known to go against the grain of mainstream expectations but it has also gained a reputation as being one of the most inventive RPG franchises in the genre. While it can't match the polish of its triple-A brethren, the artistry of its world has always managed to astound. With more expansive environments, the latest entry is no different. We're given a tour of a few new locales, watching as the sun breaks through the cracks in thick forest vegetation, mountains that dwarf the villages before and a river of lava that creates a dense plume of smoke as it hits the river.

5 A NEW HERO

IF ALL THE *Dark Souls* comparisons couldn't get any more absurd, the plot itself is almost identical to From Software's classic. You're a nameless hero wandering the world as the Titans continue to wage war. At the beginning of the game your soul is swallowed by the Shadow Lord and your task is to travel across the land and reclaim it. While hardly original, it's an effective motivator, not least for enabling players to choose between developing in either a human or demonic direction.





NOT MUCH OF A LINK

■ IT'S EASY to draw comparisons with early *Zelda* games, particularly *A Link to the Past*: your arrival at the island and the climb to the entrance is reminiscent of Death Mountain. But that's as far as it goes: *Below* is shrouded in mystery and has a sense of impending doom that contrasts with the classic hero quest of a *Zelda* title.

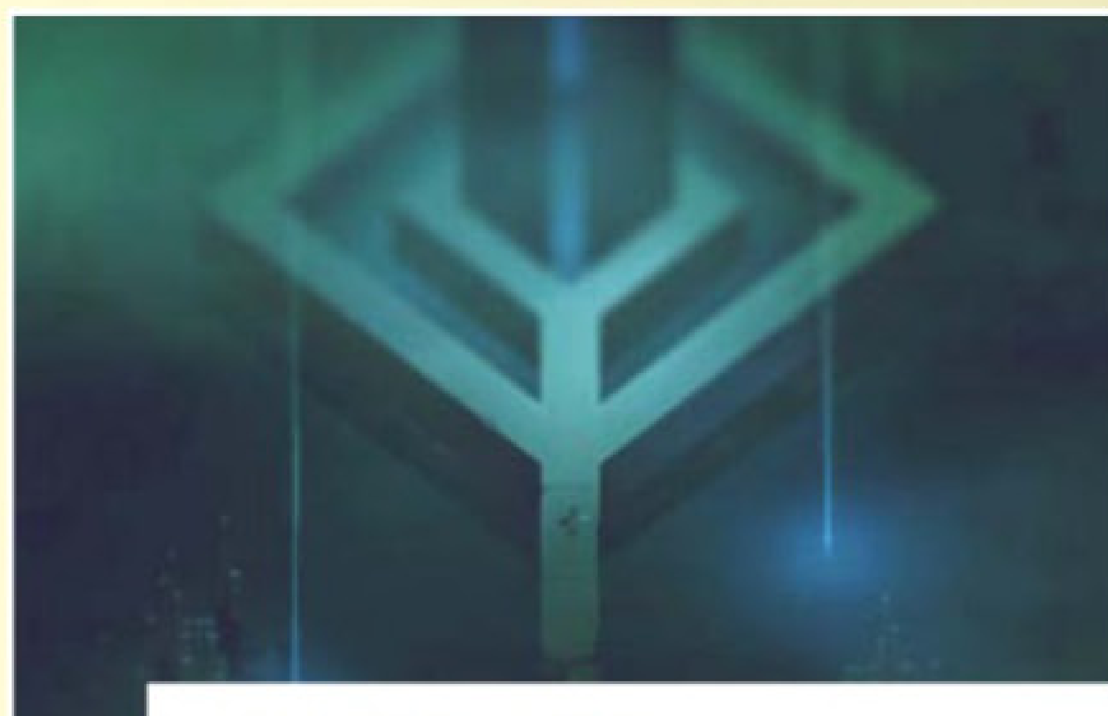
Below

CONCEPT ■ This is what *Dark Souls* might look like if it was made 20 years ago: an 8-bit style adventure with no handrails whatsoever. You're not getting any help here, no sir

"Certainty of death, small chance of success... what are we waiting for?"

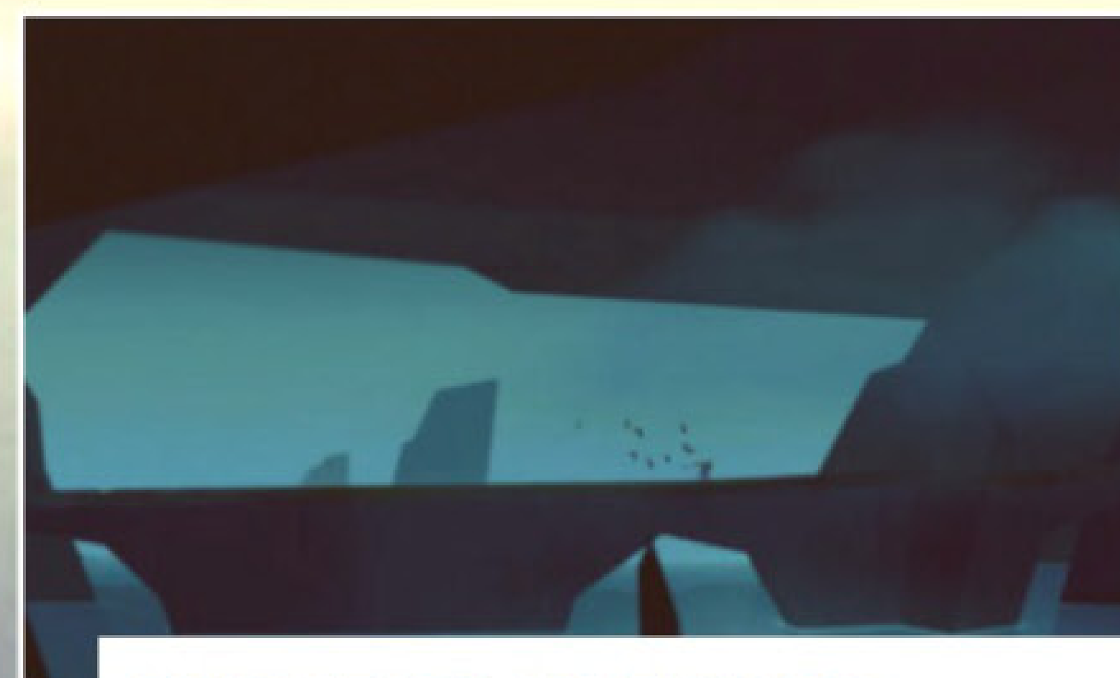
Roguelike is a term that has been bandied about more than ever since From Software made dying in a video game seem like progress, and this has led to the increased appeal of permadeath. If you truly want to know the bitter-sweetness of having a carefully nurtured character ripped away from this mortal coil in the promising bloom of its youth, then you should try an ASCII-based classic like *Angband* (you masochist). Most of us will plump for something softer, a category that *Below* seems to fall into. Its core tenets are to explore, survive and discover, the latter of which begins by pushing you off a boat onto an island armed with nothing more than the knowledge of how to move and wield a sword. Then it's up a tall mountain that dwarfs your 8-bit avatar and then down into its procedurally-generated belly, where an apparently infinitely varied course of tunnels and rooms plot ways to torment and kill you. What sets *Below* apart (superb retro art style and score aside) is that rare feeling of discovery at the risk of paying the ultimate price. Like *Dark Souls*, death isn't permanent but your corpse and everything on it remains wherever it fell, while your character pops out, for all intents and purposes naked and defenceless, back at the respawn point. If you were smart enough to drag a bloody trail to relative safety before you bled out, then retrieving everything in your inventory won't be an issue. If your last incarnation fell to the fangs of Shelob and is now strung up in a giant web, good luck...





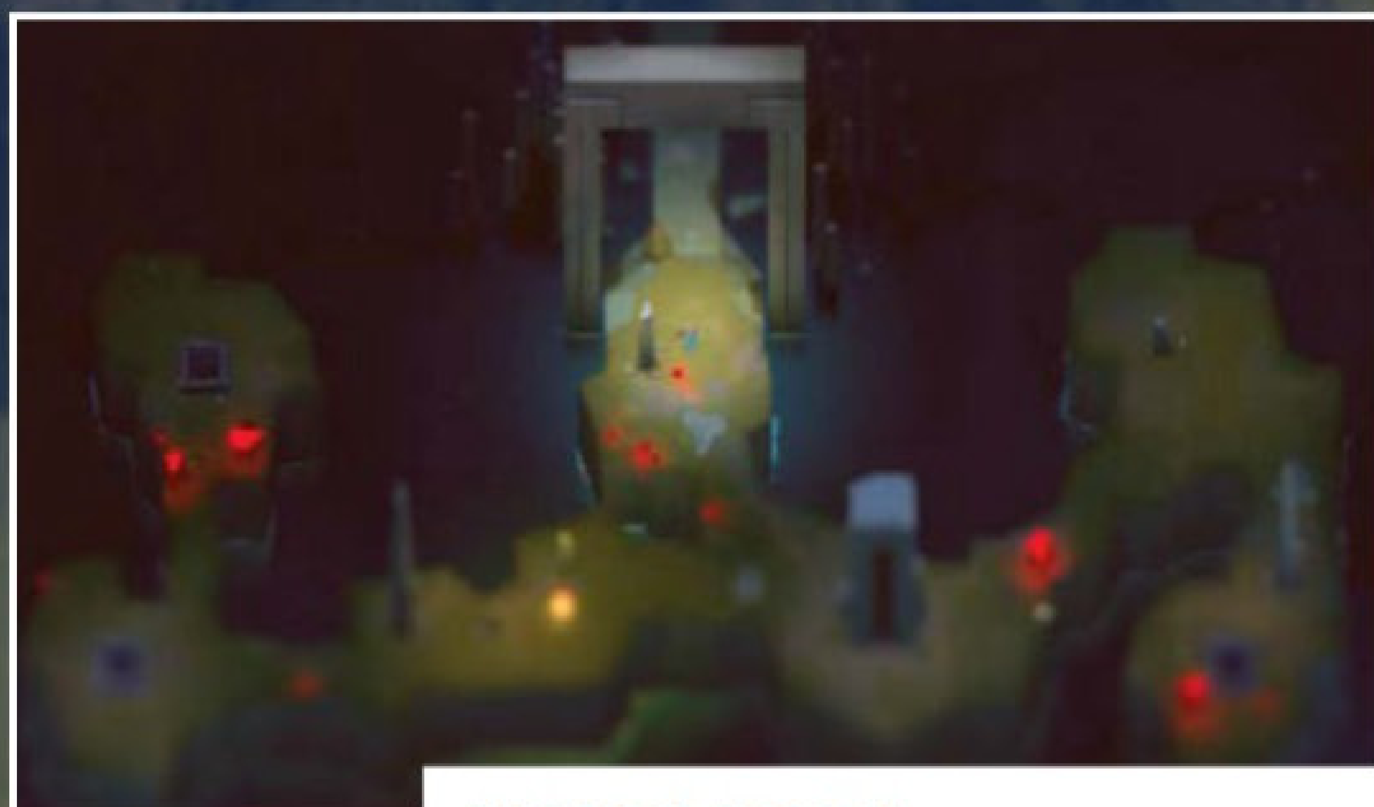
ABANDON HOPE…

THAT MONOLITHIC slab of an entrance is no less menacing from the inside. Everything in *Below* is geared towards making you feel small, weak and insignificant. Most of all, what begins as an awesome edifice atop an epic climb becomes increasingly more threatening the deeper into this labyrinthine complex you go.



TAKE HEART, ADVENTURER

YOUR MAN here treads a fine line between life and death, and we're not just referring to the perils he'll encounter along the dungeon's beaten track. Like a classic roguelike, if you get injured, you'll bleed and if you don't stop the bleeding then you will die. Neither do you have much health, so that's something to consider before you throw yourself into the path of an angry group of floating red things.



FLY, YOU FOOLS!

RUNNING AWAY from battle is most definitely an option! Go too deep too soon and you'll find yourself way over your head. Below likes to change the player's perspective too: isometric, top-down and profile, the switch can offer change in a pace of gameplay as well as a new look at the dungeon.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One/PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Capybara Games
Release: Q3
Genre: Action-RPG
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Like so many small indie developers before it, Canadian studio Capybara cut its teeth on mobile games before developing *Critter Crunch* for mainstream platforms. It made a name for itself with the superb turn-based puzzle title, *Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes* and is now tantalising fans with teasers of *Below*.

High Point

Sword & Sworcery launched on iPad in March 2011, having already won an Independent Games Festival award in 2010. It was a huge hit, and has firmly cemented Capybara as indie talent to be reckoned with.

Metro: Redux

CONCEPT ■ 4A Games has taken the original *Metro 2033* and given it a visual spiff job, bundled it with the sequel and added a bunch of new features

Going deeper underground

There's an understandable trend emerging among developers. Take a game that debuted on the eve of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, give it a graphical facelift, add some bonus content and re-release on fresh hardware. Money in the bank, as they say. But disengage cynicism for just a moment and it makes sense from a technical perspective too. As console hardware grows increasingly more complex and longer to develop for, an opportunity to get acquainted with new technology on a project with less creative risks attached before moving onto a new creative venture just makes sense.

"We were ready to move into full production immediately after *Last Light*," Deep Silver's global brand manager Huw Beynon says of the year-long development of 4A Games' *Metro: Redux* – a compilation of the series' two titles to date on next-gen platforms. "It has been a great learning experience for them, not only in learning the power of the hardware but all the additional requirements that come with console releases. That'll stand them in really good stead for the future."

/// Information regarding *Metro: Redux* was leaked months ago, but this is the first formal unveiling and it's encouraging to see a developer not just angling for a quick revenue boost and has instead crafted a new edition catering to fans of both entries. There's two play modes that are playable across both games: Survival and Spartan. Each is geared for the different types of *Metro* player. Survival strips back resources and tweaks reload speed and enemy intelligence to being the experience back to the survival horror of the original. Spartan takes a more straightforward gung-ho approach that those who joined the franchise with *Last Light* will recognise. Given the sheer amount of content and variety of options available, it's easy to see why 4A is considering this the 'director's cut'.

It's also in the details. Beynon highlights the transformative affect the changes have had on the original *Metro*. "The development of *Last Light*, from a feature and mechanical perspective, was a way of addressing many of the criticisms of the first game," he explains. "We improved AI, overhauled the stealth system, massively improved the control scheme, we added a degree of customisation to the weapons, we added the mask wipe as well. It is interesting when you go to *Metro 2033 Redux* and it feels completely natural to do all those things. It's funny how normal it feels. It has a very positive effect on the game. *Metro 2033* is an awesome campaign but now it has all the polish of *Metro: Last Light*."

/// There's also expansion in some places. Asked whether revisiting the original game has enabled the studio to insert allusions to the future of the franchise, Beynon hopes fans will be paying attention. "We didn't really want to change the canon of the story," he says. "It's fundamentally the same story. But there are a few more secrets in there, particularly in *Metro 2033* in areas that were previously dead ends – look a little closer and you'll find you can explore some new areas that have opened up."

> "It has been a great learning experience for [4A Games]…[it'll] stand them in really good stead for the future."
>
> HUW BEYNON, DEEP SILVER

It's not been an easy year for 4A Games. Aside from the THQ fallout leaving *Metro*'s publishing rights up in the air, having its offices based in Kiev meant it was facing civil unrest during the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. Beynon comments on how he had to smuggle dev kits over to Kiev as hand luggage so that the studio could continue work. Since then, the studio has set up in Malta, which should make it easier to collaborate in the future. Beynon celebrates the studio's tenacious attitude. "If you know anything about 4A you won't hear them complaining," he says. "They got on with the job at hand like they always do. They have never asked for any favours, asked for sympathy, or asked anyone to judge their work any differently – they've just got on and get then job done."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One
Origin: Ukraine
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: 4A Games
Release: August 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded by former employees of GSX Game World (developers of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*) in Kiev, Ukraine. The studio's first title was *Metro 2033*, the humble outfit impressively adapting Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky's novel of the same name. That was followed in 2013 by its sequel, *Metro: Last Light*. Apart from *Metro: Redux*, the studio is currently working on another unannounced project.

Developer History

Metro: Redux **2014 [Multi]**
Metro: Last Light **2013 [Multi]**
Metro 2033 **2010 [Multi]**

High Point

Metro 2033 is an immersive blend of creepy survival horror and exhilarating first-person action. While rough around the edges, it's well worth persevering through.









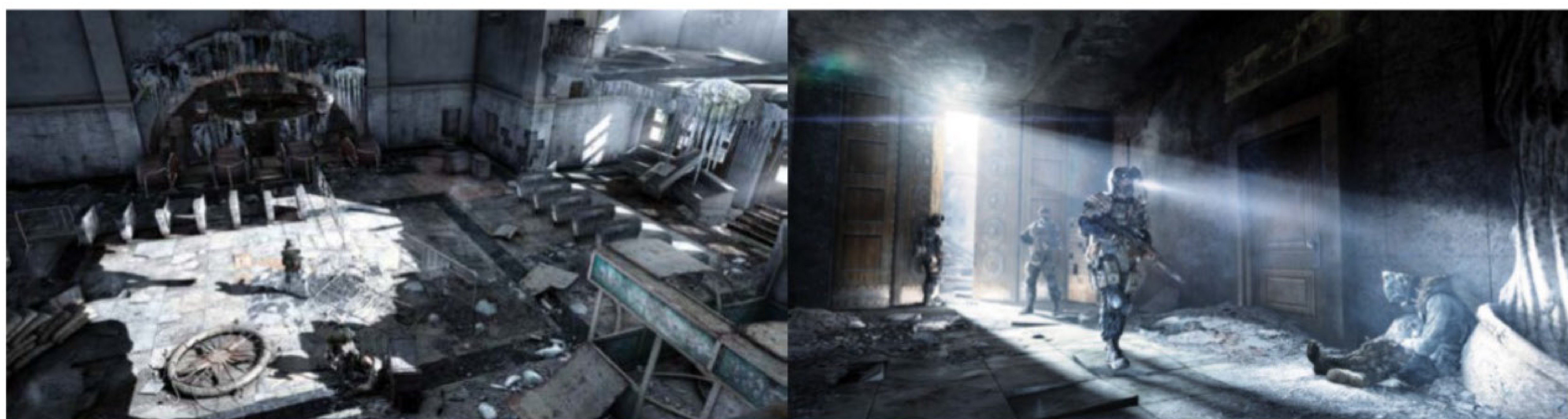
■ Above: There won't be a huge amount of changes made to *Last Light* but all the season pass DLC will be included in the game.



■ Above: The first thing you'll notice is that everything looks a lot brighter. One of the major enhancements to *Metro 2033* was the use of *Last Light*'s enhanced lighting engine. Below: Players are able to transport equipment from one title to another. For instance, Artyom's watch from *Metro 2033* can be used now in *Last Light* and vice versa. 4A Games has done an exceptional job of adapting both campaigns for fans.

A BRIGHTER DOOMSDAY

Where ashen skies once bathed entire locations in murky light and textures felt flat, the new lighting system brightens up environments and creates my detail on the screen. On top of that, human and mutant character models have been overhauled (some of which now closely resemble appearances in *Last Light*), while levels have been merged together to create larger, more dynamic environments. Scenarios too have been tweaked to amp up tension in some areas – we play through a firefight outside a library where only a dialogue exchanged occurred before – so veterans can't rely completely on their knowledge of what waits around the next corner.







Left: Each player-character is intuitively balanced, making it easy to work out how you should operate within the team dynamic. Operating as a unit and utilising each character's strengths is paramount to success. Below: There will be no shortage of enemies and loot to wipe up on the screen. It's a formula that never goes stale.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Warner Bros.
Developer: Arrowhead Game Studios
Release: Late 2014
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Arrowhead Game Studios was founded in 2010 by eight students at Luleå University of Technology in Skellefteå, Sweden. Their debut title was 2011's *Magicka* – a four-player dungeon crawler in the same vein as *Diablo* and, unsurprisingly, *Gauntlet*. It sold over 200,000 copies in its first 17 days on sale.

Developer History

Gauntlet **2014 [PC]**
Helldivers **2014 [Multi]**
The Showdown Effect **2013 [PC]**
Magicka **2011 [PC]**

High Point

Magicka is the studio's calling card: a slick, old school dungeon crawler that demonstrates why the studio is the perfect pick to recreate *Gauntlet*.

Gauntlet

CONCEPT The 1985 arcade classic receives an overhaul as part of Warner Bros. Vault initiative, featuring new visuals and features.

It's a kind of Magicka

No studio has ever had much luck at recreating what made the original *Gauntlet* such an essential multiplayer experience in the Eighties. Over nearly thirty years, several attempts have been made to update or improve on the arcade classic, almost all of which have been met with disappointment. *Magicka* developer Arrowhead Game Studios doesn't have a huge amount to live up to, then, but is no less taking the responsibility of reworking *Gauntlet* seriously. After all, its aforementioned debut title shares more than a few passing similarities to the chaotic four-player mayhem that made *Gauntlet* so beloved in the first place.

Arrowhead's new *Gauntlet* is part of Warner Bros' new Vault initiative, the aim being to revisit classic titles and offer an enhanced retelling. So beneath the improved visuals this is much the same game that was released back in 1985. For starters, the old heroes return. Players can choose between Wizard, Valkyrie, Warrior and Elf, each with basic attacks and a special that deals added damage. They are also each tweaked with a specialism, be it ranged or melee combat. These include the Valkyrie's ability to chuck its shield at enemies and the Warrior's nifty spin attack. Obviously, each of these complements each other fittingly to make the roles feel intuitively defined, enabling players to support each other during battles in an effective manner.

Certainly that's the impression we got from seeing the game in action; teamwork is an extraordinarily vital aspect of gameplay. A suitable balance between cooperative and competitive play, requiring teamwork to overcome enemy forces, while the jostle for food remains as heated as ever. Arrowhead has also stated that the option to turn friendly fire on will be available – a suitably anarchic addition that will no doubt inspire much chaos on the battlefield.

There will be some noticeable differences from the original aside from the visual buff. Boss battles will be a major enhancement, set to add an extra layer of challenge to the proceedings – a recent demo the developer gave concluded with a large mummy-like creature rising from a throne ready to do battle. But above all else, it's still the same dungeon crawler.

You battle enemies, scrap over resources and hoover up all the loot in the area. The fact that Arrowhead has seemingly managed to nail the fundamentals is a victory in itself. But it's encouraging that it has expanded outwards from the core experience, embellishing *Gauntlet* without compromising what makes it great in the first place. This could be follow-up that *Gauntlet* fans have waited decades for.



> "To us at Arrowhead, Gauntlet is one of the most defining games from our childhoods, and it's amazing to be able to work on a brand new version"
>
> JOHAN PILESTEDT, ARROWHEAD GAME STUDIOS

"By working with [the fans] I feel we were really able to make it true to the world they'd seen before"

BILL BEACHAM, PSYONIX

Though it's only in beta, Psyonix has made *Nosgoth* a bit of a treat, graphically. It's perhaps not going to compete with the *Crysis 3*s of the world, but with added effects like motion blur and gorgeous lighting it's completely absorbing.

Nosgoth

CONCEPT Set in the *Soul Reaver* universe, this is a free-to-play multiplayer game where you play as either the vampires or the humans – with differing abilities between the two races

Soul Reaver fans, beware

If you fondly revere the *Soul Reaver* franchise, then *Nosgoth* might initially leave you with something of a foul taste – it is the same universe, but not *quite* the same game. See, this is a free-to-play multiplayer shooter whereby humans – or Hunters, by the game's own terminology – fight against vampires. Teased as a MOBA of sorts, the truth is *Nosgoth* is nothing of the kind, and considering the swathe of *League Of Legends* clones we're getting these days that's probably a good thing.

The difference here is that each side has a set of different classes, each filling an archetype you've probably seen if you've played any class-based multiplayer game ever in your life. Ever. Credit where it's due, however, *Nosgoth* manages to fill each of its classes not only with a bit of variety – courtesy of their unique abilities – but with a bit of personal flexibility too. Vampires, as you might expect, are heavily melee focused and so playing this role requires a little bit of deft strategy to close the gaps. Reavers are mostly fleet of foot backstabbers that leap from rooftops, Tyrants are the brute force that can charge in to shorten a distance while Sentinels can take to the sky, swoop in and effortlessly lift an unsuspecting Hunter off their feet. But where Vampires can clamber over walls, Hunters are grounded – with only their ranged weapons and only collection of abilities to keep the enemy at bay.

It's only in Early Access at the moment, but there's already a solid game in *Nosgoth*. The meta involves Hunters packing together and working as a team to find defensible areas, while Vampires act as the predators they are, picking off targets whenever the opportunity arises. The distinction between factions provides a tangible difference between playstyles, and though you'll play as both factions in a single game, your mindset is attributed to what you're playing, not just how you decide to play. It uniquely harbours co-operation, too, which is something of an increasing rarity in multiplayer shooters these days.

To address the F2P element; fear not, there's nothing in the way of money-grabbing here and while it is possible to purchase new weapons, custom abilities and skins they can also be earned simply by playing the game. Regardless of the grind involved, however, most merciful is the fact that skill outplays the wallet – so if you're able to get to grips with the mechanics of the game there's no reason why you can't defeat an opponent who has willingly thrown their cash at it. It's impossible to say whether this will remain the case come release – or, indeed, whether *Nosgoth* has the necessary hook to draw players in for the long-term – but while this might not be the brand new *Soul Reaver* game you were hoping for, it's an intriguing multiplayer offering.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Psyonix
Release: TBA
Genre: Third-person shooter
Players: 4v4

Developer Profile

Psyonix isn't a well-known name in the industry, primarily tasked with developing multiplayer components for other games. Luckily it has quite a few reputable titles in the list, including *Unreal Tournament*, *Gears Of War*, *Mass Effect 3* and even the likes of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*.

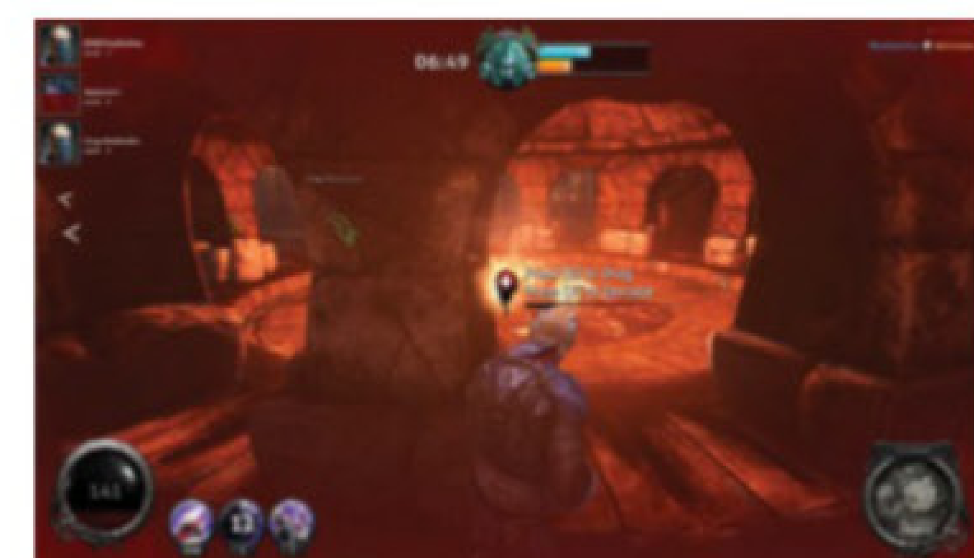
Developer History

Unreal Tournament **2004 [PC]**
Homefront **2011 [Xbox 360]**
Mass Effect 3 **2012 [Xbox 360]**
XCOM: Enemy Unknown **2012 [PC]**

High Point

It's hard to really pick a high point for a developer whose ability is often hidden from plain sight, but the implementation of *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer was a tricky challenge that paid off.





Above: Vampires can regenerate health by consuming a Hunter, exposing them. Hunters, however, can attend to health stations at certain locations, again, exposing them. Left: Hunters will only succeed if they stick together.

Available weapons include a knife, pistol, shotgun and a crossbow that can be fitted with bolts of various strength.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/ Xbox One/Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Tango Gameworks
Release: 29 August 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Shinji Mikami, director of The Evil Within and poster boy for Japanese survival horror, made his name creating the Resident Evil series. In recent years he has contributed to the likes of *Vanquish* and *Shadows Of The Damned*.

Developer History

Vanquish
2010 [PlayStation 3/ Xbox 360]
Resident Evil 4
2005 [PlayStation 2/ GameCube]
Viewtiful Joe
2003 [PlayStation 2/ GameCube]
Devil May Cry
2001 [PlayStation 2]
Resident Evil
1996 [PlayStation]

High Point

The first *Resident Evil*, due to its ability to create and sustain an incredible level of consistent tension, is one of the few videogames that will never be forgotten.

The Evil Within

CONCEPT To create a survival horror experience that is reminiscent of Shinji Mikami's earlier works, namely a combination of unpredictable scares and violent action

Promising a return to the roots of survival horror...

Combining the sophisticated joys of classical music with extreme horror is nothing new, Stanley Kubrick utilised this to great effect in *A Clockwork Orange* back in 1971. What the approach lacks in originality it makes up for in impact, a fact that *The Evil Within* director Shinji Mikami seems to have a firm understanding of if our latest exposure to the game is anything to go by.

Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 3 In D Major* plays as the lights come up on protagonist Sebastian Castellanos standing in the shadow of an ominous building that we soon learn is a hospice of some eerie persuasion. Bastardising the smooth sounds of violin and cello are the monstrosities wandering around the surrounding courtyard in grim patrol – get too close and they attack with a speed and strength that stands in opposition to their zombified appearance.

This is Chapter 4, we're told, and, having been plonked straight into this hellhole in the dead of night, we've no context whatsoever for our being here. We wouldn't have known it was a hospice unless our companion, Doctor Jimenez, hadn't explained as much in the kind of whispered, frightened tone that serves only to further exaggerate the threat of death. Morbid quiet is suddenly broken by indiscernible screams coming from a terrified man who is running away from nothing... nothing visible, at least. He runs into the building, we follow, making our way into a basement complex of stone corridors and claustrophobic spiral staircases.

/// It's interesting to note at this point that the over-the-shoulder camera employed is positioned in such a way as to hide the floor from view much of the time. This seemingly trivial point has a palpable impact on the overall tone; the removal of something you would usually take, subconsciously, for granted leaving you feeling instantly vulnerable. When we finally find the screaming man (his name turns out to Leslie) the Doc tries to calm him down and quiet his outbursts. Before he succeeds, though, the noise draws the attention of a nearby enemy and a couple of shots from our pistol to its head are needed. It's already obvious that ammo is limited and we're irritated at this loud fool for forcing us into using it unnecessarily.

> "It's not going to be all exploration, it's not going to be all horror – everything is paced very deliberately"
> JASON BERGMAN, BETHESDA SOFTWORKS

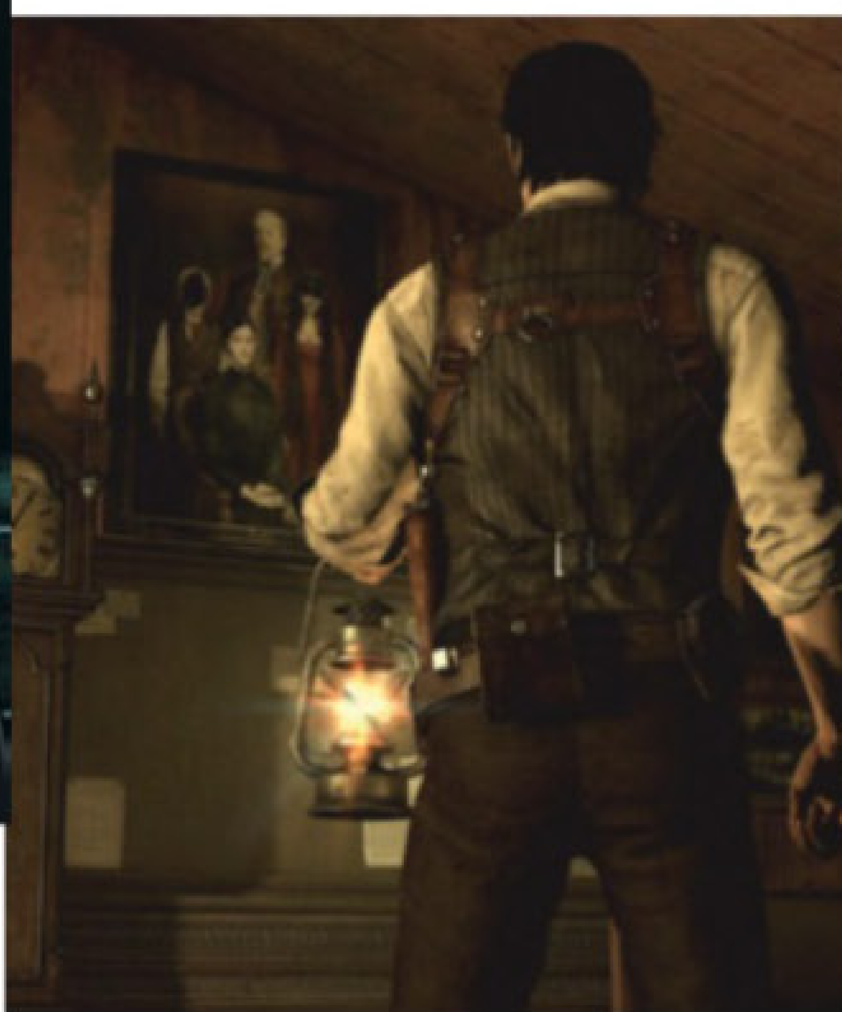
On the way out of the building, with a somewhat stable Leslie, we find that the staircase we used to descend has gone. It's been replaced by a solid stone wall. This is the first of many such paranormal events that punctuated our 70 minute-ish demo, others including a wave of blood a la *The Shining* (Mikami clearly enjoys Kubrick's work) and a ghost named Ruvik that pops up seemingly at random to terrorise you, forcing you to regularly leg it to safety as fast as you can. Think of him as the spectral equivalent of *Resident Evil 3*'s Nemesis. Running away from trouble is a recurring theme, either because you don't have the ammo or because the chaser is too powerful. Later in the chapter we're chased by a grotesque spider-like thing, a dank mane of jet-black hair covering its face. Running is the only option, the path to safety lined with various traps that must be avoided as you go.

/// The second part of our demo, set within chapter eight, feels very much like the *Resident Evils* of old and challenges you to solve three puzzles with a view to opening a locked door in an enormous mansion. Surviving skirmishes with blood-hungry fiends as you hunt for key objects and clues is a familiar endeavour that brings positive waves of nostalgia to the crashing back at frequent intervals. And that, very clearly, is the idea of *The Evil Within*: to present an aging genre in a modern way. The non-regenerating health system, the uncompromising aggression of the enemies, the unyieldingly dark environments... all of these things blended with the luxuries of HD visuals and generous checkpointing. Here's hoping those contemporary luxuries don't ultimately undermine what looks to be a game oozing potential.

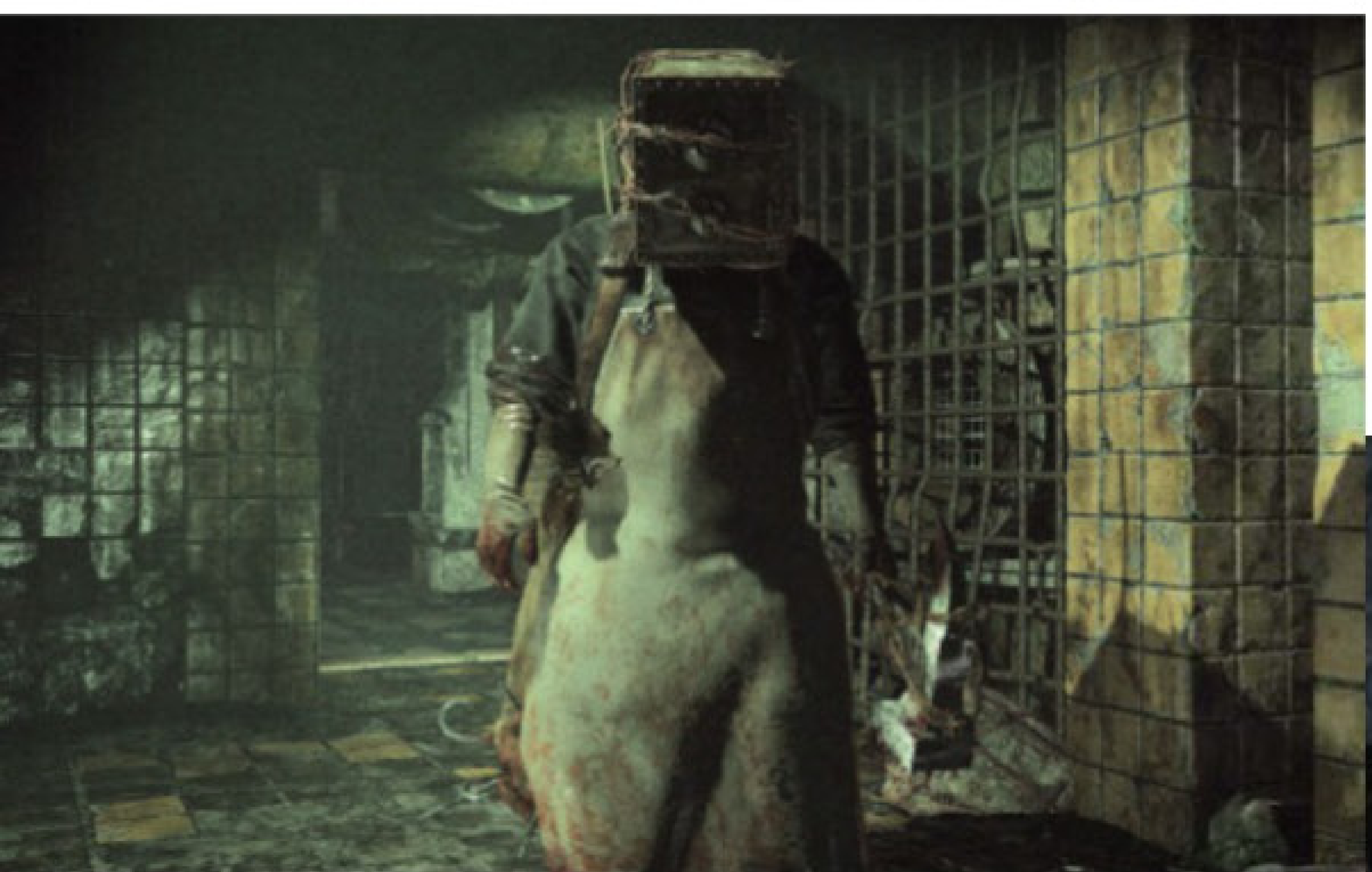




Left: If you find yourself in a particularly comprising situation, you can hide in wardrobes or underneath beds. From here you can use the analogue sticks to peek out and observe the environment before deciding if it's safe to continue.



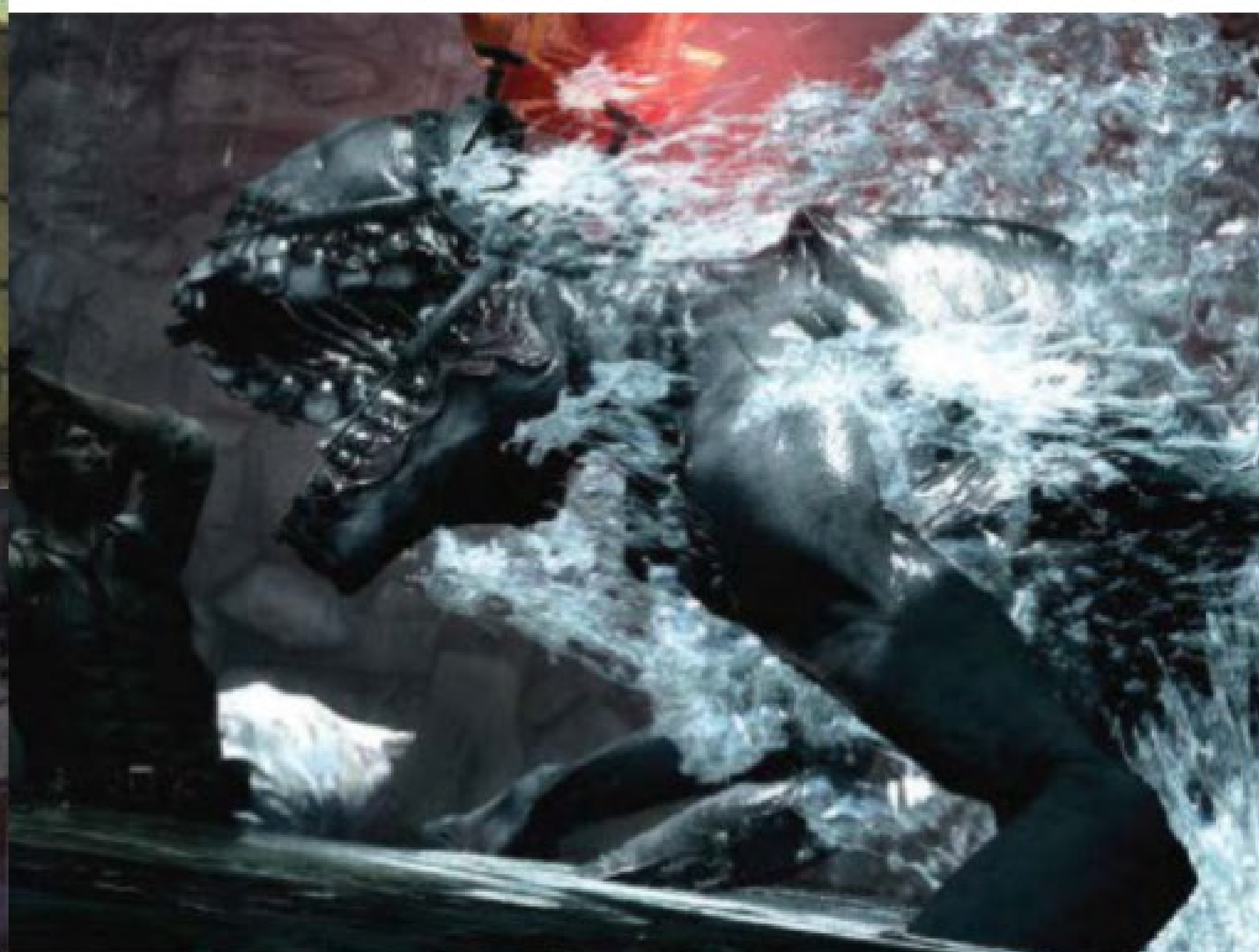


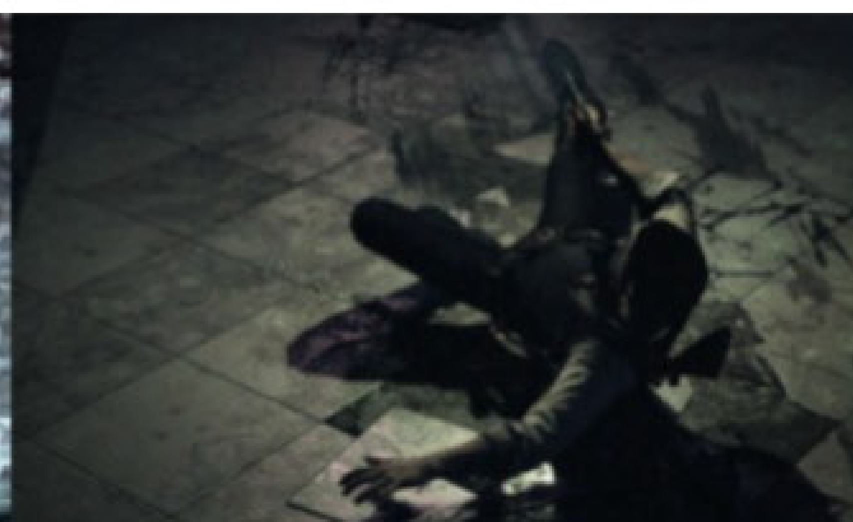


STAY SILENT, STAY INVISIBLE

THERE IS SIMPLY not enough ammo to tackle every enemy you see, forcing you into a stealth approach whenever not in the throes of an action setpiece. You're equipped with a lantern, but its light highlights your presence. You can open doors quickly by kicking them, but the noise attracts enemies. Tiptoeing slows your movement, but it's quieter than walking. It's up to you how often you take these things into account, but you will stay alive longer if you employ a more considered approach. Moreover, there are fatal explosive traps and trip wires. Difficult to see if you're running around…







Left: It is possible to sneak up on enemies from behind and perform a stealth kill. Completely destroying the head, or setting them alight, is the only way to permanently destroy most of the game's monsters. Above: Much as in *The Last of Us*, empty glass bottles can be thrown to distract enemies and create a safer route.







"Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number follows the escalating level of violence through multiple factions born from the events of the original game"
DEVOLVER DIGITAL

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

Above: As with the original, the key to high scores is by stringing combos together and cramming in as many executions as possible.

CONCEPT As with its predecessor, *Hotline Miami 2* is a top-down shooter with the emphasis on fast, difficult and quick levels and a dark Eighties vibe

Dialling up the violence to eleven

"Why do you call it a sequel when it's pretty much the same? Do you ask Activision that too? EA, Ubisoft?" In a sweaty corner of last year's Gamescom – and good god we really hope they draft in air conditioning units this year – Devolver Digital's booth stood out from the rest. Not just because of the nuclear-coloured hyperviolence of *Hotline Miami 2* but because Dennaton Games scrawled a list of banned questions on one of the nearby columns. The 'Why do you call it a sequel?' question was at the top, indicative of the similarities between original and successor that had clearly been brought up ad nauseam. (Also listed: Do you like hurting people? Why is it in pixel graphics?).

And here's the thing about *Hotline Miami 2* – it *is* pretty much the same and that's why we're excited. *Hotline Miami* was a high-score chase that saw you clearing rooms of bad guys, the bigger points awards dished out for combos and creative kills. Yet while the solid mechanics, crushing difficulty and quick-fire restarts made it an addictive endeavour, it was the way the game was presented that really helped it stand out and that same vibe is present in *Hotline Miami 2*. The soundtrack is superb, as yet another selection of dark eighties synth provides the soundtrack for Digital Devolver's gratuitous violence, accentuated by the bright pixel graphics.

The main gameplay changes are found with the new masks, which have a more profound effect on the gameplay than the original. One mask is Alex and Ash. This sees your character armed with a chainsaw and a character 'following' armed with a gun. You can't swap weapons, with pick-ups serving to refill ammo for the gun – the dual weapons open new combo possibilities the other masks don't allow.

The Corey mask gives the player a new roll move, which means you can dodge under bullets if you time it correctly. In theory, this opens up opportunity to rush goons brandishing guns as you can dodge past their gunfire, which in turn opens up new combo potential. It'll be interesting to see if there are other practical applications for the roll move. Mark is another new mask. This bear mask gives you twin SMGs that can't be dropped. Button combinations allow you to sweep the SMGs in an arc, so you can clear rooms of enemies quickly and efficiently.

Perhaps most interesting is that one of the features of hard mode is that it disables enemy-locking, a mechanic that ultimately sapped some of the difficulty from *Hotline Miami*. So it'll be every bit as difficult and every bit as fun – everything a sequel should be.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Swedish
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: Dennaton Games
Release: Q3 2014
Genre: Shoot-'em-up
Players: 1

Developer Profile

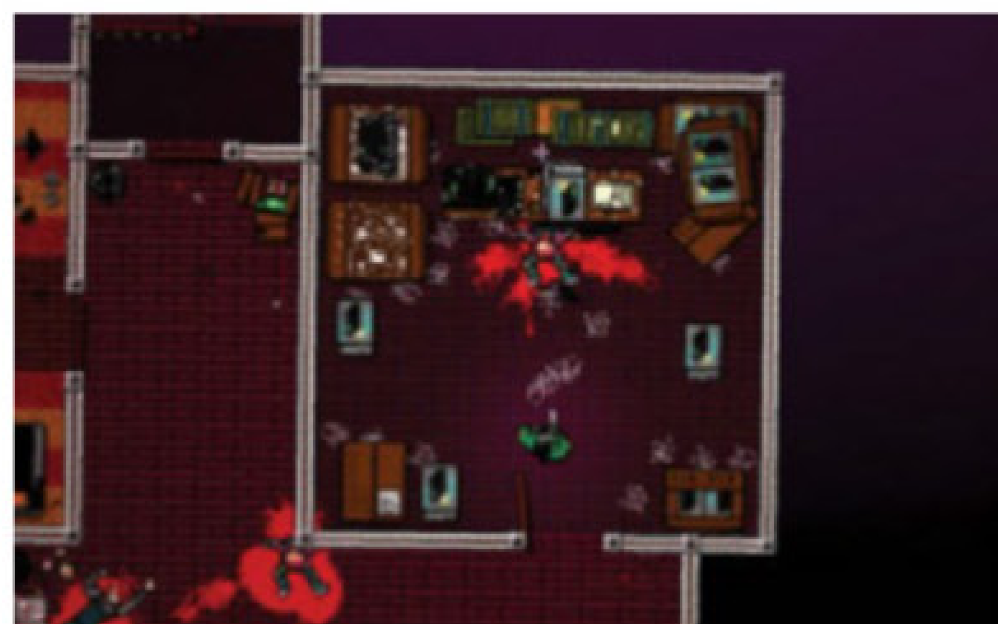
Dennaton Games is a two-man Swedish studio make up of artist Dennis Wedin and programmer Jonatan Soderstrom, the studio's moniker being a combination of their first names. *Hotline Miami* was their first game.

Developer History

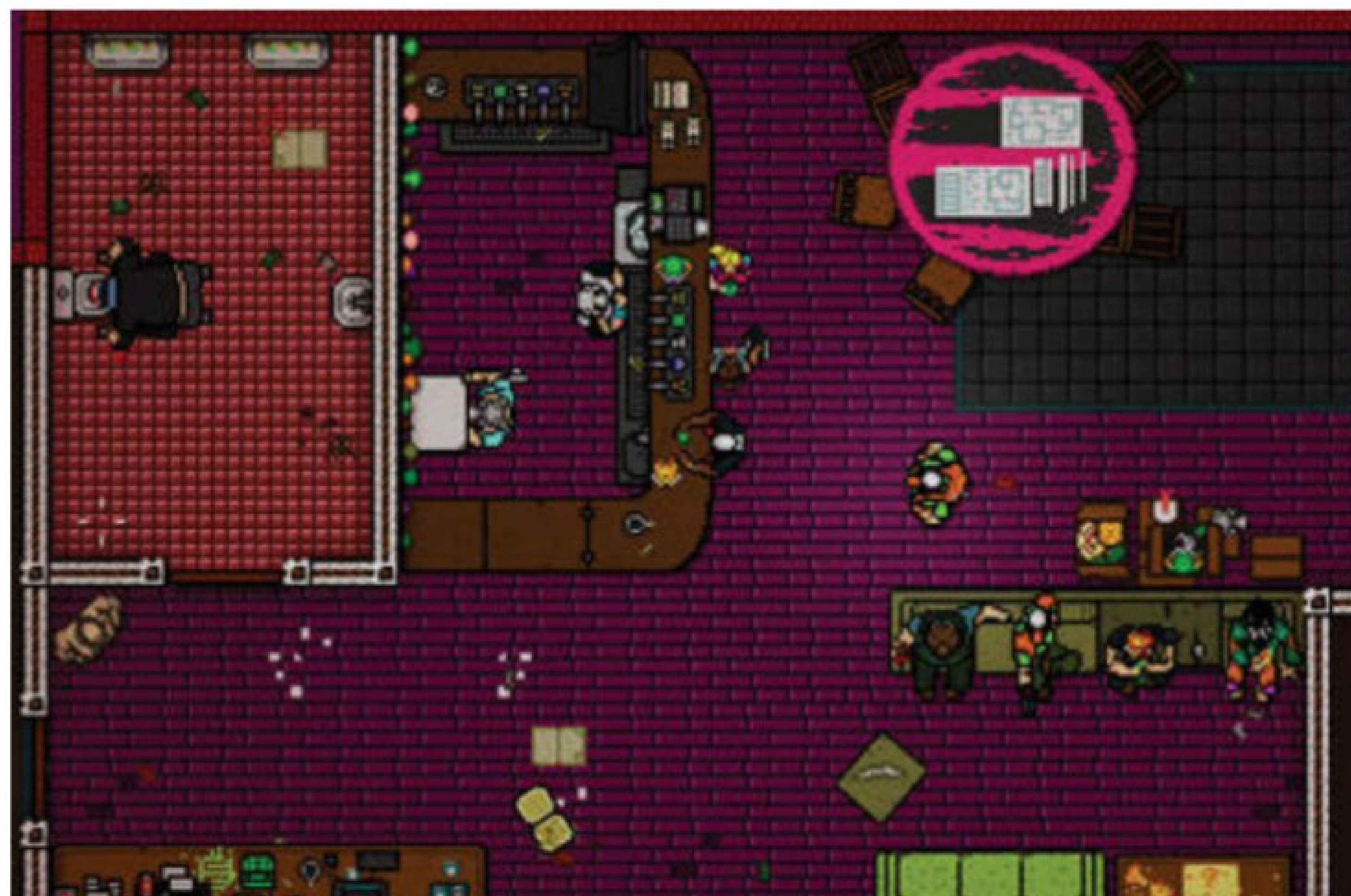
Hotline Miami
2012 [PC, PS3, Vita]

High Point

The soundtrack is the high point, as it sets the mood and vibe for the *Hotline Miami* series better than soundtracks for triple-A titles with multi-million dollar budgets do.



Above: The art style is the same, with the levels tilting ever so slightly when you skirt around the edges of each map.



"DriveClub combines nearly 15 years of racing game pedigree and a rapidly evolving, connected gaming landscape"

MATT SOUTHERN, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, PLAYSTATION BLOG

DriveClub

■ It's the visuals in *DriveClub* that stand out to us – we're keen to see if everything looks as good in motion as it does in the stills we've got here. The lighting engine has to be our favourite part of how it all looks.

CONCEPT ■ Evolution Studios is moving away from the *MotorStorm* series with another portmanteau collection of words that promise a fresh driving experience.

Surprisingly not a Chuck Palahniuk novel about cars

D*riveClub* was supposed to be a PS4 launch title – a game designed to take advantage of the PS4, showing off just what the console could do. Sony Computer Entertainment may have been a little too eager to push the game out, though, announcing a series of delays until finally settling on a date a whole year after the original announcement: 10 October.

We're not too bothered by this, though. The trailers and screens that have been teased by Evolution show a game that is truly a next-gen racer. The hype that once surrounded the title has devolved into scepticism, but it seems undeserved. *DriveClub* has been taken back to the drawing board and is being reconstructed to fit Sony's remit of 'a good game'.

Evolution Studios claims its been working with the PS4 since 2008, working with the DualShock 4 since 2010 (which has apparently allowed them to master the stiffer trigger springs that have been implemented since the PS3's controller). This long development cycle has also allowed Evolution to integrate extensive social features into the game, much like *Need For Speed*'s AllDrive, and with the game's release on PS+, you can guarantee that everyone with a PS4 will be pushing the game's severs to the limits.

Evolution is also aiming for photorealism with *DriveClub* – a strange goal when you consider the game is arcade-based. With arcade racing games, you expect more stylised art – even *Need For Speed* takes a more angular approach to its art direction. The development team has devoted an incredible amount of time to getting the particle effects, the textures and the surfaces looking just right and that the material-based lighting engine they're using falls on everything perfectly.

DriveClub's photorealism, married with gameplay that's more concerned with accessibility than simulation, looks set to make the game unique among racers coming out at the moment – perhaps offering a direct competitor to Ivory Tower's upcoming *The Crew* than anything else that is currently available on the market.

Combining the instant accessibility of what the PS4 can offer, a slew of super-realistic in-game assets and enough development time to really get to grips with the PS4's DualShock, everything points to *DriveClub* as a game that deserves the delays it's suffered. If you've got all the ingredients of a good dish, you wouldn't rush the cooking time, right? You'd let them sit and simmer for as long as possible until all the right components come together properly. It's refreshing to note that Sony and Evolution understand this.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Evolution Studios
Release: 10 October 2014
Genre: Racing
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

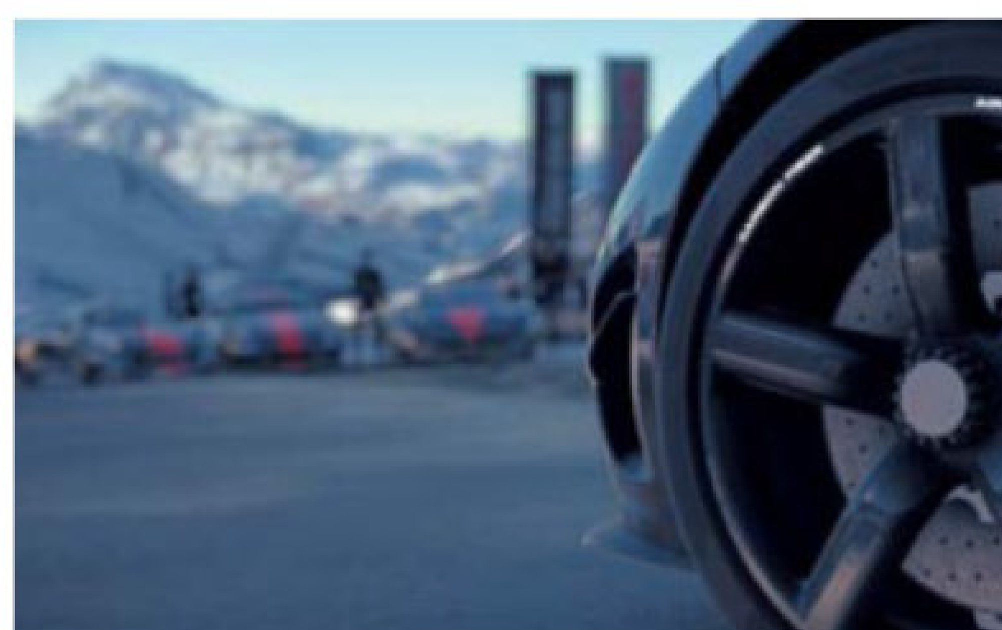
Based in the UK, Evolution Studios was founded in 1999. It worked on the *World Rally Championship* series, before moving into its own IP with the very successful *MotorStorm* franchise.

Developer History

MotorStorm: Apocalypse **2011 [PS3]**
MotorStorm **2006 [PS3]**
WRC: World Rally Championship **2001 [PS2]**

High Point

MotorStorm: Apocalypse was a competent and respectful homage to the arcade-racer, with the destructible environments and well-designed tracks making up for the graphics.



■ Above: The fact you can get so close to the cars in-game proves that Evolution really has put a lot of effort into making everything as realistic as possible.



H1Z1

CONCEPT ■ *H1Z1* is a zombie survival MMO in the same vein as *DayZ*, but with more of an emphasis on crafting shelters and surviving in a harsh open world.

SOE prepares to take on Rocket's horde

As if zombies hadn't caused us enough trouble by now, our undead brethren are set to invade yet again in *H1Z1*, an upcoming MMO project courtesy of Sony Online Entertainment. It's fairly early days, but we'd be forgiven for thinking that this title is just jumping on the zombie bandwagon, considering the industry's output over the last few years. Perhaps this is just an unmistakeable example of market-savvy game development, falling into an oversaturated subgenre. Adam Clegg, game designer on *H1Z1*, feels differently.

"Every game genre has the chance to be oversaturated," Clegg explains. "But people continue making games of that genre because each one has the chance to feel completely different. *H1Z1* gives the players a truly amazing zombie survival experience – and that's exactly what we want our players to get out of our game."

And so, perhaps the idea of SOE ruthlessly mining from the undead reserve is a cynical one, and it's clear from speaking to Clegg that SOE harbours a legitimate enthusiasm for its subject matter. "Everybody was hooked on making a zombie game as soon as the initial idea was pitched because we are all fans of zombies, from *The Walking Dead* TV series to games like *The Last Of Us*, and even old movies like *Night Of The Living Dead*. One of the developers even has zombie movies playing 24/7 in his office. We're zombie enthusiasts, and we want to make *H1Z1* a true zombie survival experience on a massive scale."

/// It appears that development is in good hands, and this has become more apparent recently through SOE's willingness to allow cameras into its studios to live stream development videos via Twitch, and the game's fairly extensive coverage on Reddit. "It is a lot of fun to develop this game side-by-side with the players. Being completely open and transparent with them actually takes a lot of pressure off of the team because it eliminates guesswork. We can just focus on working on what is right for the game and the wants of the community."

What is clear from the *H1Z1* live streams from earlier in the year is the attitude of care over at SOE. An aspect of the game that is bound to be of great interest to a lot of players is PvP and combat encounters – essentially, the competitive side of things – and this facet of gameplay is being well looked after. SOE has already implemented some excellent FPS mechanics in *PlanetSide 2*, and now with *H1Z1* it looks to carry over the same weighty, feedback-oriented gunplay that you'd expect in a simulation like *Red Orchestra*, as opposed to the akimbo-SMG madness of *Call Of Duty*.

/// This is only a portion of the game though, as players will also need to scavenge for food and supplies and build shelters in order to survive the apocalypse. It's rock-and-a-hard-place stuff as usual: do you risk heading out across open ground, all for a tin of beans, when you know there's another player lying in the long-grass waiting to clock you with a hatchet? Even if there isn't anyone else around for miles, there's bound to be a zombie lurking somewhere. It's a game world full of choices, and Clegg feels that it's a game world that will develop over time.

> "We're zombie enthusiasts, and we want to make H1Z1 a true zombie survival experience on a massive scale"
>
> ADAM CLEGG, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

"I see the world of *H1Z1* growing exponentially and at a very fast rate," he says. "Players will start in this 'middle America', but someday we hope to have a world that resembles something as large as the United States. On top of that, our crafting and exploration will continue to expand as the game grows as well." Growth is the lifeblood of any good MMO, and its up to SOE to deliver on its promise of an expanding world when the game eventually rears its rotting head. For now, though, we have to wait and wonder – is this really something new and exciting, or just an attempt to corner the market?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment
Developer: In-House
Release: TBC
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Sony Online Entertainment has been one of the leading purveyors of MMO games since the mid-to-late Nineties, and has been responsible for some of the most expansive products that the MMO movement has seen. Alongside *H1Z1*, the company is also developing the much-vaunted *EverQuest Next*.

Developer History

EverQuest **1999 [PC]**
Star Wars Galaxies **2003 [PC]**
DC Universe Online **2011 [PC, PS3, PS4]**
PlanetSide 2 **2012 [PC, PS4]**

High Point

PlanetSide 2 – by all accounts SOE's 2,000-player FPS leviathan shouldn't have worked, but what we've been left with is an ambitious and polished MMO with genuine mass-market appeal.







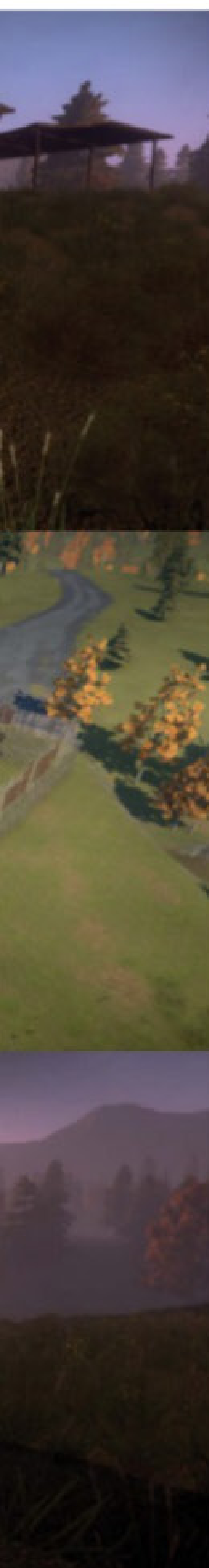


■ Above: Environment design looks stunning, even at this fairly early stage of development. Right: SOE would do well to perfect the behaviour of its horde.



WAR OF THE DEAD?

It's clear from the early screens of *H1Z1* through to its overarching gameplay ideas that this is a project very similar to Dean Hall's scavenge-fest *DayZ*. However, when pressed, Clegg feels that this similarity doesn't indicate a prospective rivalry – something that is bound to become a popular belief over the coming months – and instead takes a more diplomatic approach: "We are focused on launching on Steam Early Access and creating a fun, deep zombie survival game," he tells us. "There's not a lot of time to think about much outside that. We're fans of *DayZ* though, so we're just as excited as everyone else to see what's next for the game."



■ Above: Although the focus isn't necessarily on combat, SOE has been careful to develop its FPS mechanics to a high standard, including ballistics research, which is discussed in one of the *H1Z1* videos on Twitch. Below: The comparisons to *DayZ* aren't completely unfounded, but with Sony's support infrastructure we wouldn't be surprised to see *H1Z1* surpass its contemporary in terms of quality.

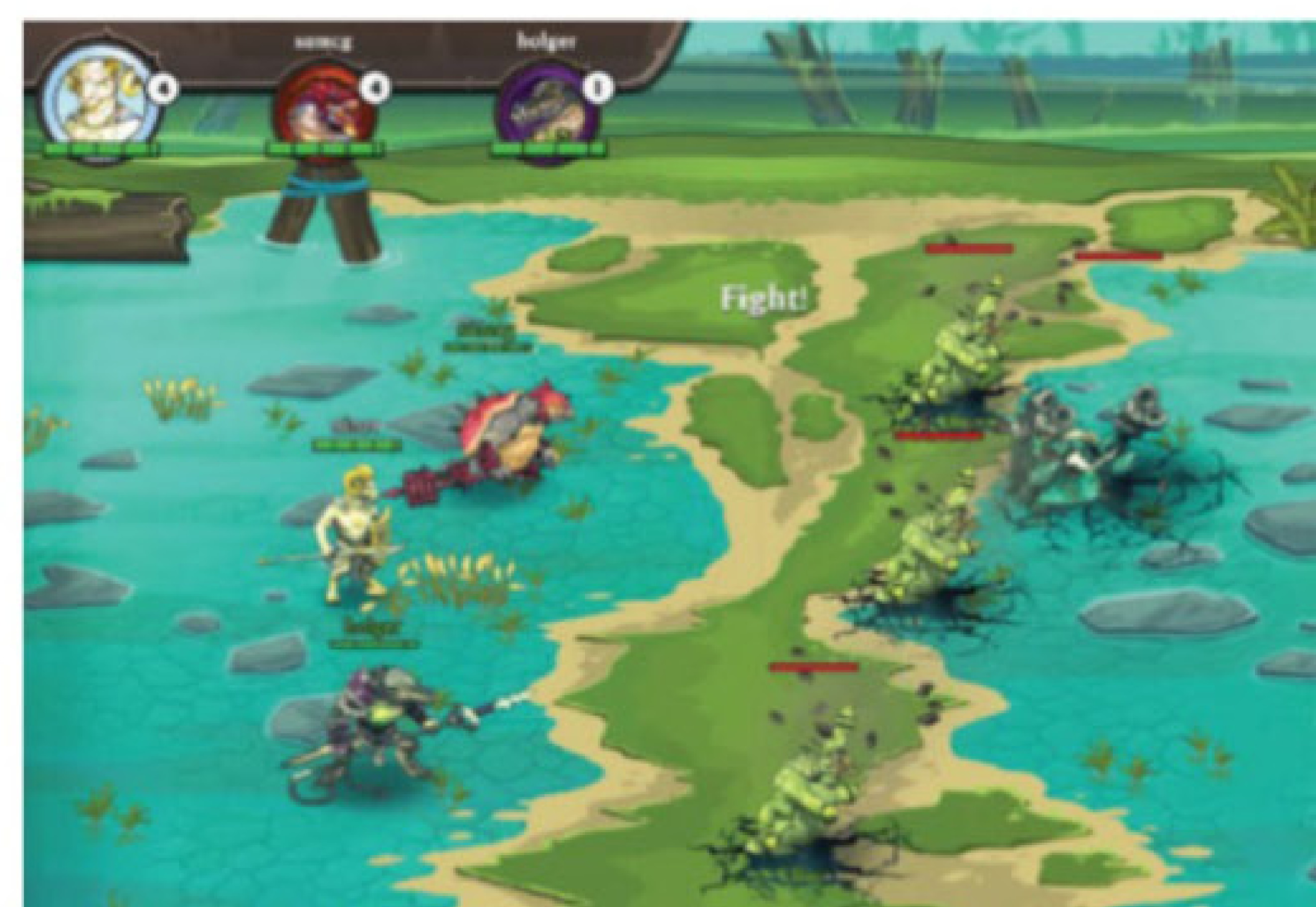








Left: The Champion characters in the game all take the form of anthropomorphic animals, each with a special ability. Enemies are presented as contorted creatures that need to be exterminated.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: iOS
Origin: Austria
Publisher: Gameforge
Developer: Sproing
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: MOBA
Players: Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Gameforge is one of the most notable publishers of online games. Operating since 2003, some of its prominent titles include *Aion*, *Tera*, and *Runes Of Magic*. In recent years it has expanded its profile substantially, even developing titles in-house alongside its regular publishing duties.

Developer History

Aion
2012 [PC]
Tera
2012 [PC]
Runes Of Magic
2009 [PC]
OGame
2006 [PC]

High Point

Tera was surprisingly robust, involving stunning MMO from the publisher that made the wise decision to adopt a free-to-play business model shortly after launch.

Sigils: Battle For Raios

CONCEPT An ambitious free-to-play online MOBA designed from the ground-up on iPad. It hopes to add a new dimension to online gaming.

Bringing the MOBA to the iPad

The vast majority of tablet games and its ilk are designed as mobile experience; games dissected into bitesize chunks of content to be consumed in a short space of time. Few possess the depth of their console counterparts and there's very little in the way of multiplayer.

That could all be about to change if Austrian-based developer Sproing has any say in the matter. With *Sigils: Battle For Raios* the studio is leading the vanguard in shifting the perception of the tablet-gaming market.

A cross between an MOBA and an RPG, players pick a character, each with individual strengths and abilities and engage in PvE and PvP matches across various arenas. What's core to the studio's mandate is investing players in both the world and the characters that inhabit it – there's a deep mythology that runs through the background of the game and forms the basis for many of the encounters you face during the game's campaign.

More important is the connectivity between players. Once you've chosen your character (referred to as Champions) you're dropped into a central hub where players can congregate and chat. Here you can also group together and form teams to tack the PvE campaign or challenge each other to a PvP match.

Screen real estate has been a key factor in translating the MOBA to the iPad, enabling room to pick attacks and command your Champion on the battlefield.

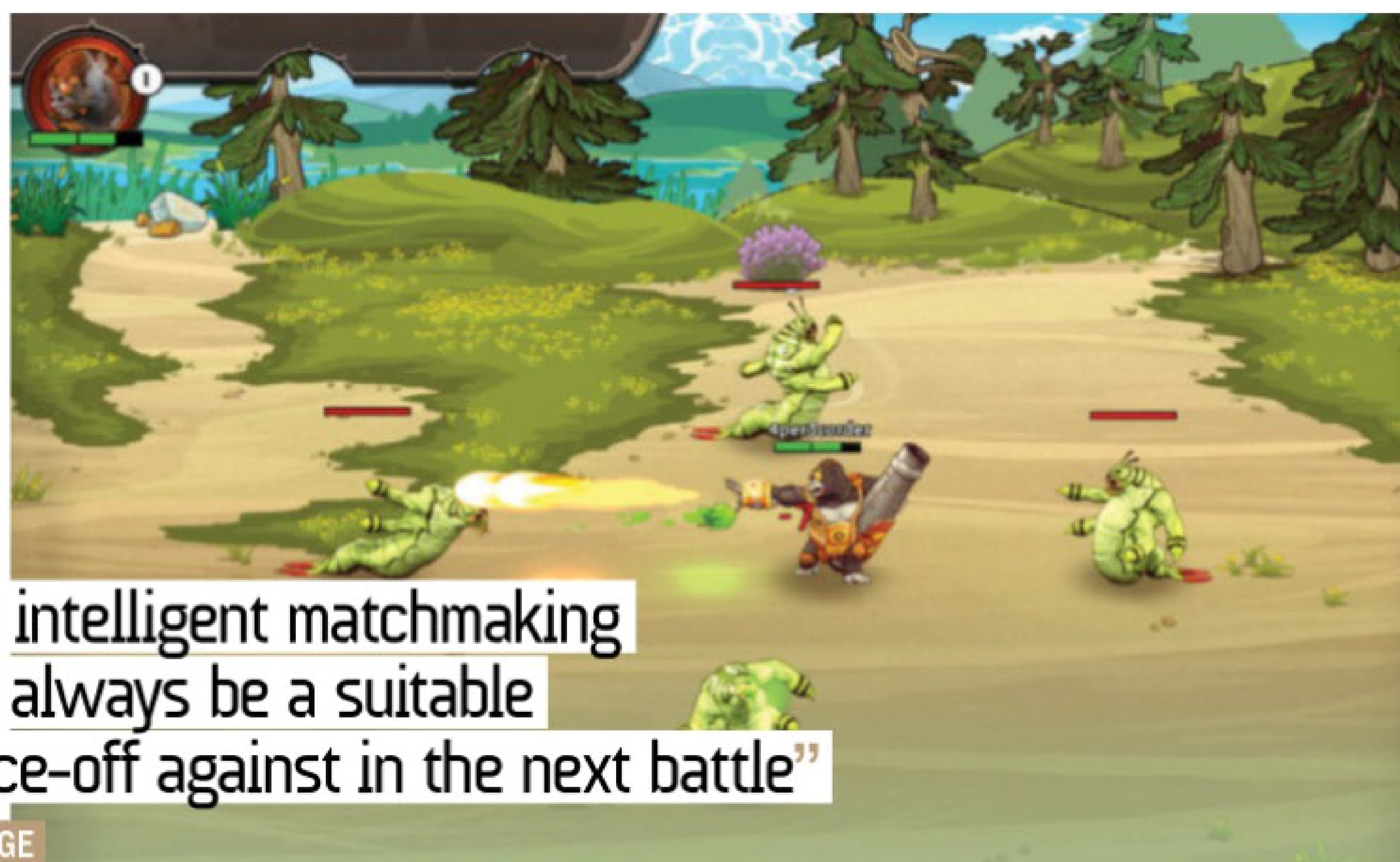
While the likes of *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2* are currently fending off emerging competitors as they continue to dominate online gaming on the PC, *Sigils* carves a niche by bringing the genre to Apple tablets. It's still a tough sell, given the intensely intricate systems and hardcore nature of the genre on PC, but Sproing has skilfully translated the fundamentals to tablets without compromising too much of what makes those other titles such a roaring success.

The proof will be when the game goes live and whether the matchmaking system and multiplayer servers are up to the task of delivering the necessary low latency to keep the action going seamlessly.

There's an encouraging amount of content being served up, with *Sigils*'s RPG mechanics offering a huge amount of longevity to keep players locked into matches. There's a simple progression system that enables the players to gain new abilities and strengthen their Champion over time.

It's the accessibility that impresses most, however. It's easy to grasp the basics, even for those unfamiliar with the genre, while there's a balance of skill that should satisfy MOBA purists hoping to take gaming on the go. Time will tell whether *Sigils* will galvanise other studios to develop more expansive gaming experiences on tablet devices.





"Thanks to the intelligent matchmaking system, there'll always be a suitable opponent to face-off against in the next battle"
TIM CAMPBELL, GAMEFORGE

> "Players will explore the dark and very personal theme of vengeance in a world where decisions have a consequence, and those consequences persist even after death"
>
> SAMANTHA RYAN, WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE

Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

CONCEPT ■ Players are thrown behind the gates of Mordor and tasked with butchering their way through the Orc hierarchy up to Mount Doom, utilising an innovative Nemesis system

An unexpected journey

After the initial announcement of Warner Bros. latest attempt at bringing the world of JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth to videogames, attention didn't turn to what was unique about *Shadow Of Mordor* but rather where it was looking for inspiration. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* was an obvious comparison, as was *Assassin's Creed* – the latter spawning accusations of plagiarism from one Ubisoft employee over Twitter. But while parkour and impactful combat are the bedrock of gameplay, the emergent scenarios that inform the way you interact with the world distinguish *Shadow Of Mordor* from anything else currently in the market.

While the game will have its own linear narrative, which features its hero Talion slaughtering his way through Mordor on a rampage of revenge, the Nemesis system creates dynamic interactions with Mordor's denizens that form smaller stories individual to each player. These take form through encounters with enemies. Even the lowliest grunt has the potential to make a huge impact on your journey to Mount Doom, whether you've left your mark on them or vice versa (death is a gameplay device; respawn and in-game time has passed several hours).

So if a Uruk manages to cut you down on the battlefield, they'll be promoted within the military ranks, which gives a boost to their stats and abilities. More impressive is how each is procedurally generated, meaning that they'll have personality traits that tie into their strengths and weaknesses. You may find an Orc that's afraid of fire, or another that becomes incensed when there's inter-species fighting. Exploiting these is key to bending the world and its hierarchy to your own benefit.

Viewing the world from the army screen – that lays out the Orc hierarchy like a tabletop board game – you're able to orchestrate yourself up to the top of the pecking order, moving players around and infiltrating the upper echelons with your own troops (one of your character's inherited Wraith abilities involves mind control). The result is a system that is brimming with potential, offering a series of opportunities that create meaningful consequences on a ground level, both intentional or otherwise – oddly, there's much comedy to be found in how scenarios play out.

It's a wilfully playful mechanic that offers something beyond routine. Whether it'll be enough to convince gamers that *Shadow Of Mordor* is more than an also-ran of ideas remains to be seen, but there's little question that when it comes to new ideas, Monolith Productions' title is full of them. 

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Warner Bros.
Developer: Monolith Productions
Release: 7 October 2014
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 1994, Monolith Productions built up a reputation as a publisher of mature titles before developing. It's debut title was the popular *The Matrix Online*, but the studio caught mainstream attention with the atmospheric *F.E.A.R.*

Developer History

Guardians Of Middle-earth **2012 [Multi]**
Gotham City Imposters **2012 [Multi]**
Condemned: Criminal Origins **2005 [Multi]**
F.E.A.R. **2005 [Multi]**

High Point

F.E.A.R. gave new life to the horror genre, blending exhilarating first-person gunplay with terrifying set-pieces. It's a shame that subsequent entries in the series have yet to recapture the spirit of the original.





■ Above: *Shadow Of Mordor* unites the talents of Troy Baker and Nolan North again, both voicing major roles. Left: One of the most useful Wraith abilities is the power to possess Orcs and command them to do your bidding.



■ Left: All the best sandbox games have a 'reset' button, and *Habitat*'s 'fire and forget' is great – point the rockets in different directions, hit the button, and see your habitat tear itself apart.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC, Mac
Origin: America
Publisher: Versus Evil
Developer: 4gency
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: Physics-based strategy survival
Players: 1

Developer Profile

4gency made its developmental debut creating games for tablets and mobile – mostly on iOS. The studio is founded by Charles Cox – a veteran of the industry, earning his stripes with Xbox, Sierra Studios and Zipper Interactive, while the wider development team are credited with work in *Halo 4*, *Deus Ex* and *SOCOM 4*.

Developer History

Node.Hack **iOS [2012]**
Armored Drive **iOS [2012]**
SOCOM 4 **PS3 [2010]**

High Point

Although a relatively young studio, *Node.Hack* stands out as the high point of its output to date. Although progress owes as much to luck as it does strategy, this intriguing title is definitely unique.

Habitat

CONCEPT ■ Gather debris that has been scattered in space to create new homes for mankind, while fending off hostile takeovers and zero-G physics.

Bringing a new definition to 'vacuum' cleaning

As children, the freedom offered by Lego sets is universally appealing. No matter what your culture, heritage or income, children everywhere have enjoyed Lego and the physical game that it encouraged. What's better than Lego, then? Lego in space, of course, which is basically what *Habitat* offers.

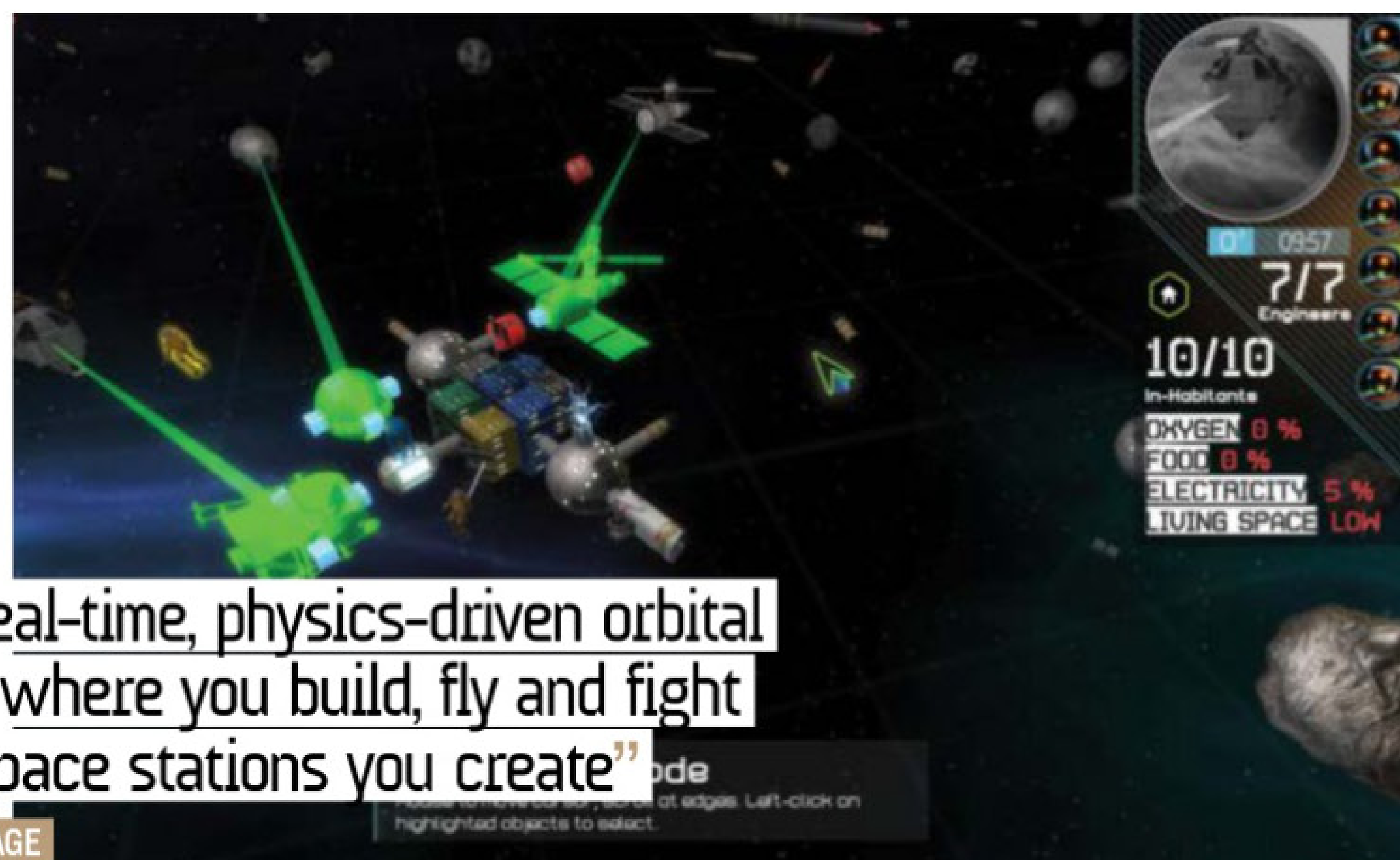
In a distant future where humanity has solved its landfill problem by jettisoning all of its garbage into space, enterprising engineers have set out to construct habitats out of the debris that's been left scattered around an Earth. You're on the forefront of a new frontier, the hopes of mankind resting on your shoulders. *Habitat* takes all the most enabling aspects of *The Sims* construction mechanics and twins them with *Dead Space*'s zero-G arenas, and the result is something with the potential to become truly unique.

The cosmic litter is organised on 2D planes, with zero-gravity physics enacted on each item. You command a team of scavenging astronauts, each commanded with drag-and-drop mechanics that are simple and easy to pick up. Direct them to some space-junk and they'll fit it to your habitat. The larger and more classy your floating apartments are, the more civilians you'll attract. It creates an exponential difficulty line – the more civilians you attract, the more space you'll need to make their lives comfortable; the more space you have, the more threats you'll attract.

■ Originally developed for the PC, 4gency promises that the interface will work just as well on a pad as it does with a conventional mouse and keyboard.

Rival habitats offer either chance to expand, or chance to react: should you choose to initiate a forced takeover of a competing space-station, your local denizens will board and attempt a hostile takeover. You can then join this to your ship – a huge step forward for your isolationist society. Otherwise, you can play with the zero-G physicals to fling bits of junk at the other habitats, engaging in a mortar-fire war that could end badly for both sides: because the physics of the game are loyal to real life, a single misfired piece of machinery could lead to a catastrophic chain reaction – your own projectiles could, eventually, prove fatal to yourself.

It's the madness of the zero-G atmosphere that's got us excited about *Habitat* – the Xbox One's processing power allows for a screen full of miscellaneous shrapnel at any one time, and it's in the chaos of the floating technological viscera that this game comes into its own. With a sandbox mode and a full campaign, *Habitat* sets out the mythology of its curious universe with tact and aplomb, and – looking at the package as a whole – it seems like exactly the kind of game Microsoft needs on the ID@Xbox platform.



"Habitat is a real-time, physics-driven orbital strategy game where you build, fly and fight with unique space stations you create"
HABITAT KICKSTARTER PAGE

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

ARENA OF FATE

Format: PC, undisclosed consoles
Publisher: Crytek
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3



CRYTEK HAS entered the multiplayer online battle area with the announcement of *Arena of Fate*, where 5v5 matches see beefed-up versions of Frankenstein, Jack the Ripper and Little Red Riding Hood pitted against one another. The game comes from Crytek Sofia in Bulgaria, who previously created *Knights of Honor* and *WorldShift*. Whether this has the depth to rival the longevity or ardent fanbase of *DOTA* remains to be seen.

MAD MAX

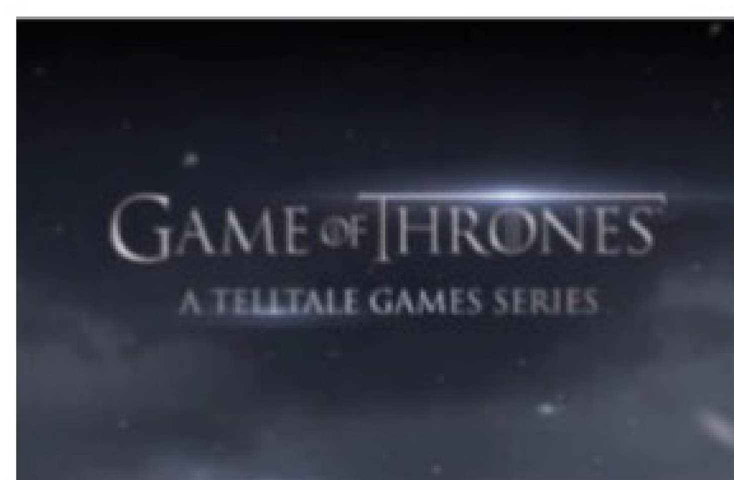
Format: Multi
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Avalanche Studios
ETA: 2015



JUST CAUSE 2 developer Avalanche returns with the post-apocalyptic action-adventure *Mad Max*. There's a little bit of id Software's Rage here, with vehicular combat playing a large part across the game's expanses of desert. What we're waiting to hear is whether Avalanche implanted any of *Just Cause*'s experimental anarchy into the experience – the inclusion of a Grapple-esque harpoon gun is certainly a step in the right direction.

GAME OF THRONES

Format: PC, Undisclosed consoles
Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2014



TELLTALE IS turning its spin-off expertise to George R.R. Martin's Machiavellian world of Westeros later this year. We know little about how Telltale plans to tackle the task, only that this will not be a prequel like *The Wolf Among Us*, but a concurrent timeline as in *The Walking Dead*. "There's so much going on and it's so rich," Telltale CEO Dan Connors told Digital Trends. "Every decision King Joffrey makes impacts people."

UNREAL TOURNAMENT

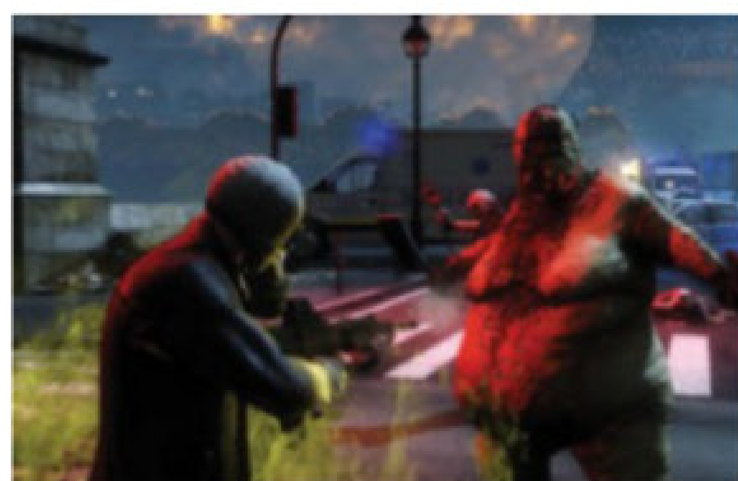
Format: TBA
Publisher: Epic Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBA



UNREAL TOURNAMENT is set to be rebooted by developer Epic, with a core team of UT veterans currently underway on the project. Epic is taking an open approach to the development of the game, with collaboration between the game's creators and the players taking place on forums and Twitch streams. The game is also going to be completely free – not free-to-play, but actually, totally, completely *free*.

KILLING FLOOR 2

Format: PC
Publisher: Tripwire Interactive
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBA



THE GAME that started as an *Unreal Tournament 2004* mod is now getting a sequel, with Tripwire promising plenty of 18-rated content to please the gore hounds, down to completely unique instances of every severed zed giblet. The sequel will remain a simple affair – kill waves of attacking enemies, get better weapons, rinse and repeat. So, expect more of the same, but this time with prettier-looking gore.

THE LAST OF US REMASTERED

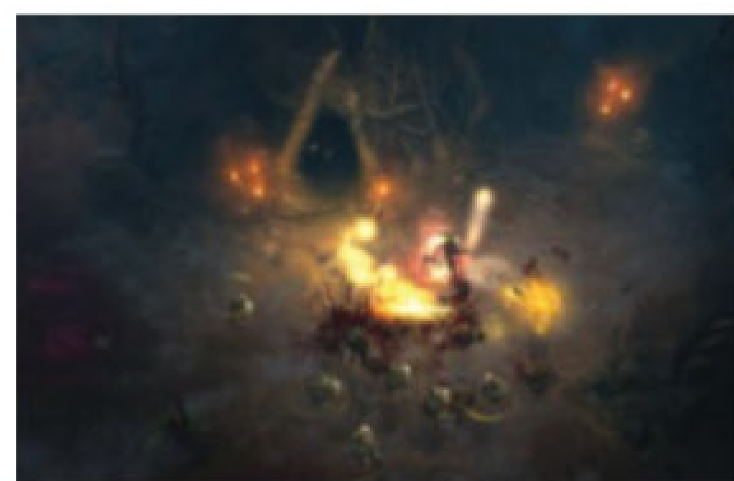
Format: PlayStation 4
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Naughty Dog
ETA: TBA



THE LAST OF US is a welcome piece of fan service, with followers of the game having requested a PS4 version before the PS3 version was released. Remastered in 1080p, the update brings improved lighting, textures and higher res character models – with the models used in cut scenes now running natively in-game. *The Last Of Us Remastered* isn't just a HD do-over; it's paving the way for Naughty Dog's next-gen steps.

DIABLO III: ULTIMATE EVIL EDITION

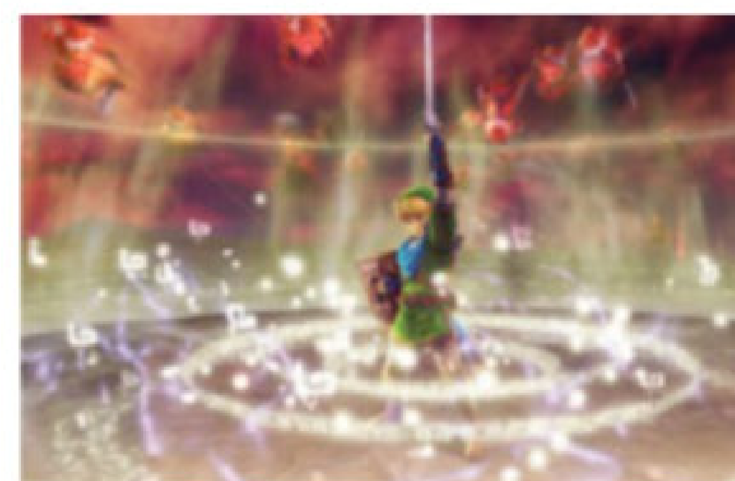
Format: Multi
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Developer: In-House
ETA: 19 August



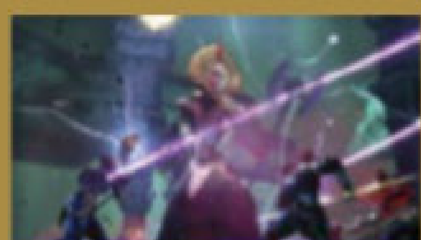
BLIZZARD HAS announced that the *Ultimate Evil Edition* of *Diablo III* – the original game plus the *Reaper of Souls* expansion – will be coming to all consoles in August. All four versions have same-screen four-player co-op and online multiplayer, and a new Apprentice mode that boosts low-level players' power while fighting with friends of a higher level. There's a new mail plan for player to transfer items.

HYRULE WARRIORS

Format: Wii U
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Omega Force, Team Ninja
ETA: 14 August (Japan) TBA (worldwide)

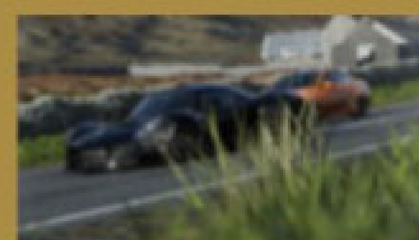


A COLLABORATION from the teams that brought us *Ninja Gaiden* and *Dynasty Warriors*, the question surrounding Hyrule Warriors is whether it will feel like a *Zelda* game, or just another button mashing beat-em-up with a Hyrulean facelift. All the trinkets are there, but fans won't be interested without *Zelda*'s inventive game design to back it up. It's certainly an interesting project and one to keep an eye on.



DELAYED –The Elder Scrolls Online, (Multi)

The Xbox One and PlayStation 4 versions of Bethesda's MMORPG have been delayed for a further six months. "We are still working to solve a series of unique problems specific to those platforms," read a statement.

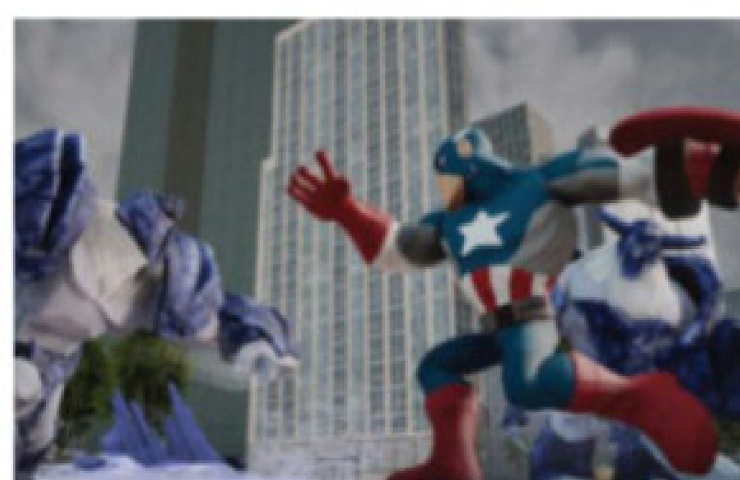


DELAYED – DriveClub (PlayStation 4)

DriveClub has been postponed once again to 8 October 2014 – almost a year after it's original date. "The team needed more time to give you the game you're waiting for," said Sony Worldwide Studios boss Shuhei Yoshida.

DISNEY INFINITY 2.0 MARVEL SUPER HEROES

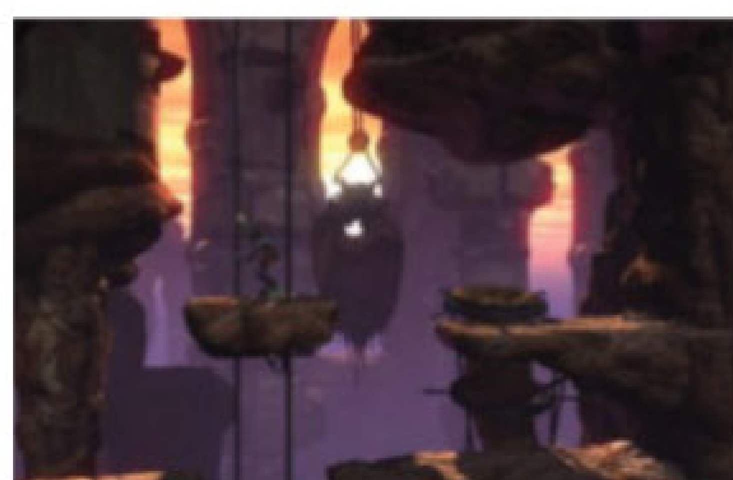
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Disney Interactive Studios**
Developer: **Avalanche Software**
ETA: **September 2014**



GIVEN THAT as of January 2014 the original *Disney Infinity* sold over three million starter packs equating to around $500 million in global sales, a sequel to the franchise was inevitable. This time it's Marvel characters that have come to the fore, with *The Avengers* and some of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* team currently announced as playable characters. There's little doubt that this will be yet another runaway success.

ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY

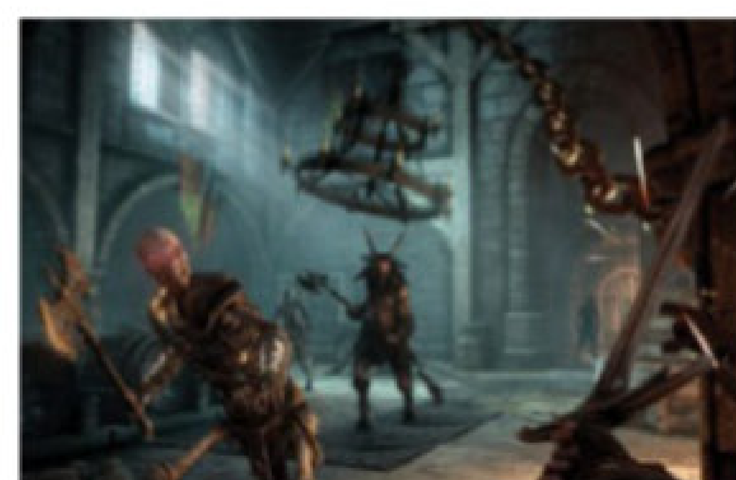
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Oddworld Inhabitants**
Developer: **Just Add Water**
ETA: **2014**



IT'S BEEN nine years since an *Oddworld* game was last released, and 14 since we experienced one on a 2D plane. As such, it was somewhat disappointing to learn that this return to 2D is only a reimagining of the original adventure rather than something new. However, to label it as a simple HD do-over would be inaccurate. This is a remake, but one built completely from scratch with 3D graphics, using the original game as a blueprint only.

HELLRAID

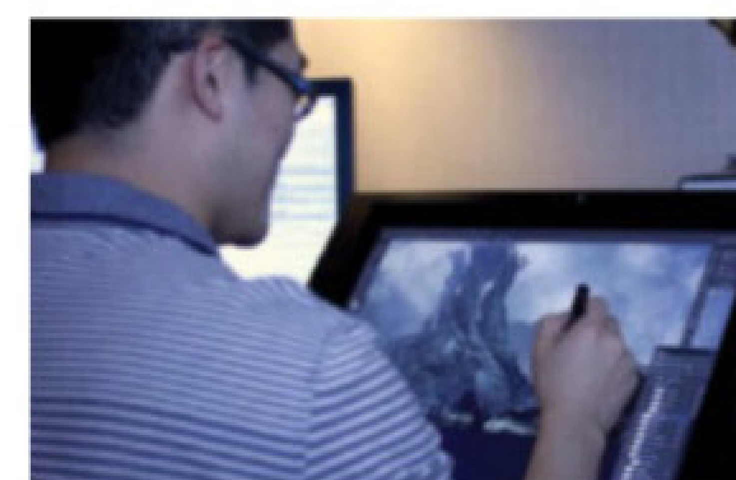
Format: **PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Techland**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



FOLLOWING THE announcement of *Hellraid* last year, things went quiet over at Techland. It turned out that the time was spent overhauling the game's mechanics and getting the experience ready for next-gen systems. A new melee and magic combat system has been built from scratch, and the four character classes have been reduced to one universal class, allowing players to adapt to the play-style of their preference.

MASS EFFECT 4

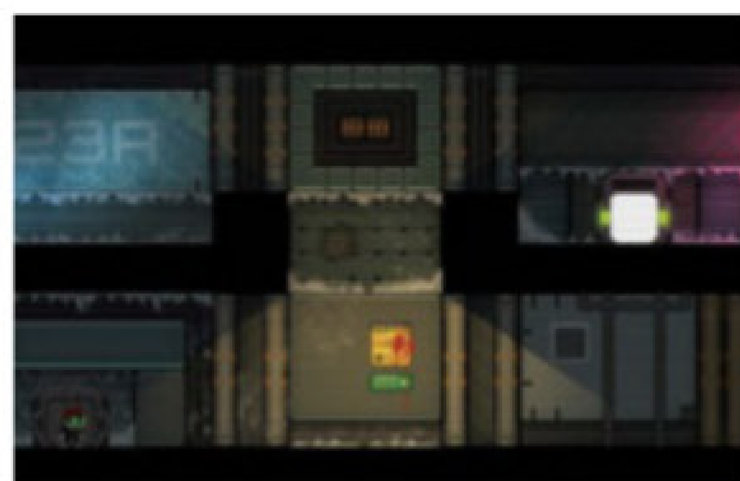
Format: **TBA**
Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **BioWare**
ETA: **2015**



BIOWARE MONTREAL'S Yanick Roy recently took to Twitter to state that the next *Mass Effect* is "somewhere in the middle" of development. That puts the release date some time in late 2015 – a year after the release of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. So far we know there will be a new protagonist and that Shepard's companions are unlikely to return. Rumours have surfaced that vehicles like the original *Mass Effect*'s Mako will appear.

STEALTH INC 2

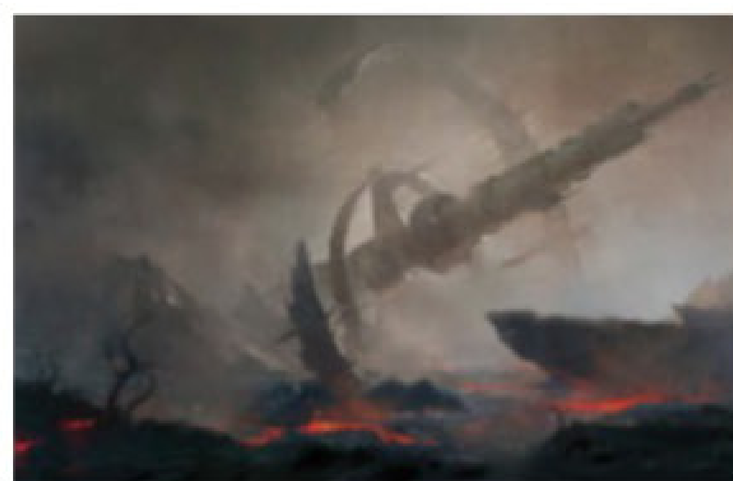
Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Curve Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



STEALTH INC 2, the upcoming sequel to Curve Studios' 2D infiltration game, is to launch on Wii U later this year. The decision was partly made due to the lack of competition currently existing on the Nintendo eShop and the opportunity to stand out on a console currently bereft of exclusives. *Stealth Inc 2* sees players return to PTi Industries, but this time with full run of the facility rather than just its test chambers.

PROJECT LEGION

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **CCP Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA**



PROBABLY THE biggest news to come off the back of EVE Fanfest 2014 was the announcement of *Project Legion*, a free-to-play PC shooter that looks to build off ideas introduced in *Dust-514*. According to CCP executive producer Jean-Charles Gaudechon the game emerged from a desire to move towards a more sandbox style of FPS within New Eden, merging the mechanics of EVE Online and shooters.

MAPLESTORY 2

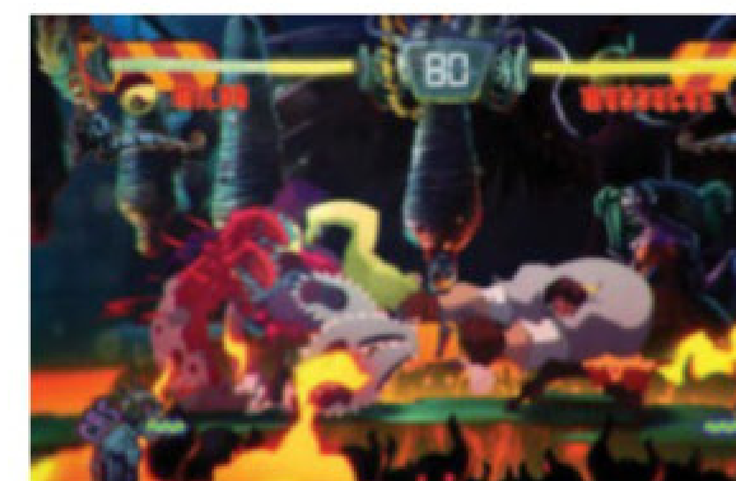
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Nexon**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA**



A PREQUEL to South Korean MMO *MapleStory*, this entry into the series transports gameplay from the 2D platforming realm into colourful, blocky 3D, while retaining the charm of the original. The social focus remains, bolstered by action with far greater scope, with wall climbing, swimming and driving all included. *MapleStory* is planned to enter beta in Korea later this year, with no release date confirmed.

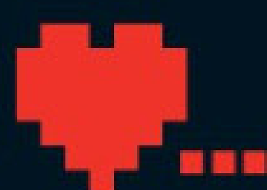
THE CHAINSAW INCIDENT

Format: **PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita**
Publisher: **Origo Games**
Developer: **In-house, Crazy Piranha Animation**
ETA: **TBA**



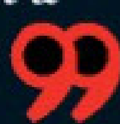
ORIGO GAMES' *The Chainsaw Incident* is a wacky, hand-drawn 2D brawler that channels old school titles like *Guilty Gear* with its cartoon style and rock'n'roll mayhem. There are 14 horror-themed characters to choose from, a unique control method based on what the devs call its Gas and Clutch system; and as you might expect, a lot of chainsaws. It looks like an imaginative and anarchic affair.



WHY I ...

Sid Meier's Pirates!

IAIN WILLOWS, 2K GAMES

"Sid Meier's Pirates! is the one. If I had to go back to something...I played it again recently and it brought back so many memories. I'm not necessarily into the pirate thing but it was the immersion. You really got into having your fleet of ships, sword fighting was excellent and I had a real bug for treasure maps – you'd get a snippet of a treasure map and try and find the cross. It was one of those games where you could get hours and hours of fun. All that time ago they built this game that had so much to it that you could literally spend hours upon hours playing it. Most games you spent hours and hours on because they were difficult or broken, but this had such a huge amount of depth so early in the medium." 

"[It] had such a huge amount of depth so early in the medium"

IAIN WILLOWS, 2K GAMES

DER YEARMAN
N 12 MEN
SHAKEN

Nintend'oh

With low sales and dwindling third-party support, Nintendo's Wii U is in dire straits. How did it get here, and can Nintendo turn its fortunes around? **games™** investigates...



Mainstream and specialist media alike are often accused of perpetuating a negative narrative about Nintendo. But whether or not that's true, there's simply no positive way to spin its current financial situation, nor that of its home console business. Recently, the Kyoto-based company posted losses of $457 million for the last fiscal year, the third term in a row its numbers had been firmly in the red.

Back in January, Nintendo revised its sales prediction for Wii U down by an unprecedented two-thirds, from 9 million to 2.8 million. By March 31st, it hadn't even reached the last figure, standing at 2.72 million units for the previous 12 months. The hardware's lifetime sales were a little over 6 million, compared with 7 million for Sony's PlayStation 4, released a full year later. One journalist posted a snappy soundbite that the console had sold half the number that Sega's Dreamcast had by the time it was discontinued – not entirely true, as it turned out, as the figure discounted Japanese sales, but even including them Wii U still fell short of Sega's ill-fated console. Nintendo seems keener to stay the course than its former rival, which isn't all that surprising when you consider what it has in reserve; it isn't all that long ago that the Wii and DS were a huge success. "Most of that money went into the bank," says industry veteran and *Oddworld* creator Lorne Lanning. "And it's still there. So they're not a cash-poor company." Indeed, the company's most recent investors briefing saw a bullish Satoru Iwata insisting it would double down on the Wii U's GamePad, quickly putting to bed suggestions that Nintendo would – as Microsoft did with Kinect – announce a cheaper SKU without the costly controller.

Details on these games are expected throughout the coming months, but it's hard to gauge quite how significant a factor *Mario Kart 8* will be in the long run in terms of shaping the console's future. The series' HD debut may not come close to the sales of the previous home console edition (which topped 35 million copies, becoming the Wii's best-selling game outside pack-in title *Wii Sports*) but it's a potential system-seller, and early estimates suggest that it might lead to a small spike in Wii U sales which could yet cause a ripple effect in the months to come. Beyond that, Nintendo is betting substantially on the new *Super Smash Bros.* and its forthcoming Nintendo Figurine Platform, »

> "Nintendo has failed to tell the public what the Wii U is, who should buy it and why"



Nintendo is hoping the excellent *Mario Kart 8* will boost Wii U sales over the summer months and beyond.



IF YOU BUILD IT…

Conventional wisdom says that only Nintendo games sell on Nintendo platforms. But two of our interviewees believe that first-party software is a crucial factor in encouraging sales of third-party titles. "The success of 3DS came from releasing many varied, high quality games, both at retail and on the eShop at varied price-points," says Rhodri Broadbent. "The 3DS eShop is full of really nice games like *Gunman Clive* and *Steamworld Dig*, *Nintendo Pocket Football Club* and *Pullblox*. Essentially, they gave the system a clear identity through its unique games, and players seem to have responded well." Dan Pearce, meanwhile, suggests that Nintendo needs to encourage customers to go digital by focusing on the eShop. "Digital marketplaces in the past have needed a few really awesome games to get people comfortable with buying online, and I think Nintendo need a few more games that do that for them. Maybe some terrific indie games will come out of leftfield and make eShop purchases more common, or maybe Nintendo will make a game with one of their franchises that draws people to the eShop. It's kind of what they're doing with the Virtual Console, though I don't think that appeals quite as much to casual players."



which is obviously aiming for a slice of the family-friendly toy/game market currently dominated by *Skylanders* and *Disney Infinity*. This latter strategy says much about Nintendo's precarious position: a traditionally proactive company has become a reactive one, attempting to capitalise on a trend that may already have passed its peak.

Meanwhile, leading third-party publishers have all but abandoned the Wii U. EA and Activision ported their games to the console in its early months, but the biggest franchises were increasingly noticeable in their absence. Even Ubisoft, traditionally a robust and loyal partner, announced before E3 that it would not be showing any games in development for Nintendo platforms. This, however, is a less startling development than it would first seem, as it follows a prevailing trend that was only temporarily broken by the phenomenal success of Wii. The perception that third-parties have departed in their droves in recent years ignores the fact that Nintendo's relationships with western publishers in particular have been uneasy for some time.

Consider the Wii's predecessors: the N64's cartridges were more expensive and more restrictive compared with the optical media used by the PlayStation, which meant most publishers favoured Sony's console. And while the GameCube saw Nintendo competing on an even technical footing, Sony already had a substantial head start, with the PlayStation 2 quickly establishing itself as the lead development platform for multiformat releases. With Microsoft throwing a lot of money at the Xbox until it bore fruit – not to mention the aces-in-the-hole of *Halo* and Xbox LIVE, the GameCube was just another



Criterion's fine port of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* was EA's last game for Wii U.

Nintendo console, and third parties struggled once more. Even the Wii couldn't sustain its early momentum, and while we're still seeing new releases for the 360 and PS3 well into their twilight years, Wii game releases have all but dried up.

Even so, it's a surprise to see the Wii U struggling quite this badly. So what's gone wrong? "I think a large part of it is down to the Wii being a plug for a huge gap in the market for casual players and the Wii U being kind of a transitional console," says indie developer Dan Pearce. "Between the Wii launch and the Wii U launch, the App Store blew up, and it made the Wii U's position as both a core gaming machine and a casual gaming machine kind of redundant. Obviously there are many, many more factors at play here, but that's the one that sticks out the most to me."

For Brjann Sigurgeirsson, CEO of Image & Form, which has enjoyed success on



Super Smash Bros will be one of the first titles to support the forthcoming Nintendo Figurine Platform.



Nintendo's E3 2011 conference: the Wii U had big shoes to fill following the Wii's strong sales.

3DS with *SteamWorld Dig*, there are several reasons for the console's lacklustre performance. "There were no real system-sellers at launch, strange hardware specs which ruled out the [Basic SKU] as a viable purchase, and stronger next-gen competitor consoles looming on the horizon," Sigurgeirsson explains. "But mainly I think Nintendo has failed to tell the public what the Wii U is, who should buy it and why. I've never seen the unit itself properly branded. Is it a family console? In that case, how and why should people let it replace their Wii units? Or is it a gamer console? In that case, where are the really strong titles?" It's clear, too, that Nintendo's messaging has confused consumers, with some mainstream publications continuing to report that Wii U isn't a console in its own right, leading many to believe that the GamePad is simply a costly add-on for the original Wii.

"Maybe Nintendo doesn't feel the need to brand or even push the Wii U," Sigurgeirsson continues, citing the oft-stated arguments that Nintendo can afford to post losses for several years yet, and reminders that it has bounced back from poor sales in the past. "But if not worrying in the past becomes the strongest argument for not worrying about the future, then we have a meta-discussion instead of a clear vision forward," he adds. "It's not like Nintendo can simply whip out a new console and apologise for the Wii U. That would drive the community mad, and could put them where Apple was in the Nineties, with short hardware cycles and confused consumers in droves."

Sigurgeirsson also believes that Nintendo would be unwise to focus its attentions entirely on Wii U, as its handheld may begin to lose the momentum it took so long to build. "They need to be more successful with the Wii U," he insists. "More strong titles, and more unit sales, [and] I'm sure a lot of us devs can help with the titles. But a prolonged uphill battle with the Wii U means fewer resources for the 3DS – and future consoles." »

"Nintendo is making a conscious effort to promote and spotlight the content it has on the eShop"



Brjann Sigurgeirsson is CEO of Image & Form, which is currently working on another entry in the *SteamWorld* series.



Lorne Lanning has been in the videogame industry for 20 years, having co-founded Oddworld Inhabitants in 1994.

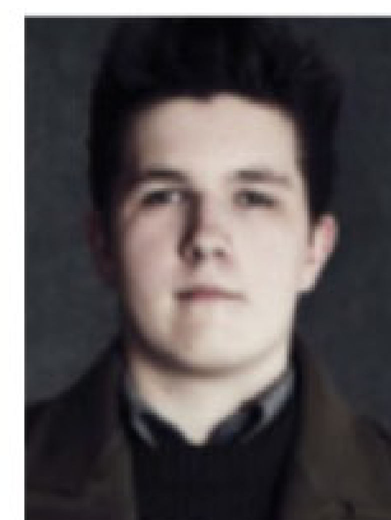


Nintendo struggled to adjust to HD development, leading to delays for its biggest Wii U games, like *Pikmin 3*.

Dakko Dakko's Rhodri Broadbent recently released *Scram Kitty And His Buddy On Rails* on Wii U. He's hopeful that Nintendo can turn things around for its beleaguered console. "It's a shame the market hasn't taken to Wii U in any great way yet. The system had a slow start with a host of ports of already-released games from other systems, and Nintendo delayed a number of their crucial key titles, so it didn't gain that vital word-of-mouth support." Fighting back from that start is still a challenge for Nintendo, Broadbent suggests, because established opinions among enthusiast gamers, retailers and the media can be hard to change. "But nowadays, the system plays host to a bunch of great, very unique games like *Wonderful 101* and *Pikmin 3*, and the eShop is really starting to pick up, so I am still optimistic that it can play a [key] role in the future of the console market."

If Wii U sales were to pick up, it wouldn't be entirely unprecedented. Nintendo managed to transform the fortunes of 3DS, after all, overcoming a shaky first year full of headlines similar to the doomsaying prophecies for Wii U. The rise could be partly attributed to a substantial price cut, but the real reason for its upturn was a regular flow of quality software. Could Nintendo transfer that success to its home console business? "They're definitely applying the same strategy," agrees Broadbent, "but the scale of the work required to bring games out on HD home console hardware is daunting. Delays are commonplace if not standard nowadays, right? Having to schedule a constant stream of big hitters is a big task, but hopefully the eShop provides a good way to keep the games coming at a steady rate."

For Dan Pearce, it's a case of offering the right kind of software. "I'm not sure that Nintendo can [recreate 3DS's success with Wii U], at least not in the same way. The success of the 3DS is in a large part down to *Pokémon*, and the success of the Wii was in a large part down to *Wii Sports*. The Wii U doesn't have that hook yet that makes everyone talk about it, and I'm not sure what that hook would need to be."



Dan Pearce was the winner of the first BAFTA Young Game Designers competition. He has since released titles on PC.



Rhodri Broadbent previously worked for Lionhead and Q-Games before setting up his own studio, Dakko Dakko.

The Numbers Game

Nintendo hasn't always achieved massive success with the launch of its hardware and software products but the Wii U's failure to date marks a new low for the company. Looking back at Nintendo's history, we track the highs and lows that have signalled the company's grip over the marketplace

Total Hardware Units Sold

- 1983–1994 **NES: 61.9 MILLION**
- 1989–2000 **GAME BOY: 118.69**
- 1990–2000 **SNES: 49.10**
- 1996–2002 **NINTENDO 64: 32.93**
- 2001–2006 **GBA: 81.51**
- 2001–2007 **GAMECUBE: 21.74**
- 2004–2007 **DS: 154.88**
- 2007 **WII: 101.06**
- 2011 **3DS: 44.50**
- 2013 **WII U: 6.16** [AS OF 30 MAY 2014]

Sigurgeirsson suggests that Nintendo could leverage the loyalty of the 3DS community by introducing incentives. "Perhaps [they could] discount Wii U's for 3DS owners and vice versa? More systems means more software sales and a more positive cycle." No sooner than we talked to Sigurgeirsson, Nintendo announced that 3DS eShop titles *Pullblox* and *Fallblox* would be discounted on launch day for Wii U sequel *Pullblox World*. With its Miiverse social network now established across both formats and, belatedly, a unified Nintendo Network account system, it's clear Nintendo is keen to nurture its existing fanbase. Its stance on digital software is still problematic, with purchases tied to hardware rather than individual accounts, but it's a sign that Nintendo is listening to common complaints from fans and press alike.

And not a moment too soon, suggests the Image and Form CEO, who believes that it needs a passionate and engaged community to grow. "They [seem to] have a harder time 'converting' young people into Nintendo diehards," he says. "It's an issue that must be addressed." Apart from a comparatively small but deeply loyal fanbase, there's another group that Nintendo is beginning to win over. Though the larger third-party publishers continue to ignore Wii U and 3DS, the eShop is beginning to look more attractive as a platform for independent developers. The rise to prominence of indie gaming is an ongoing trend, but as the likes of iOS and Steam get flooded with releases, it's harder for less-established studios to get noticed. Here, Nintendo has the advantage.

"Nintendo does seem to make a conscious effort to promote and spotlight the content it has on the eShop," admits Pearce. "That's important for developers. *Gunman Clive* and *SteamWorld Dig* both appeared to benefit greatly from Nintendo's talkative, tight-knit community when they launched on 3DS first and other platforms later. That's an interesting strategy if you can afford to do it, and it's something that I think adds some value to the eShop as a platform."

"Obviously I'm rooting for my own cause here," adds Brjann Sigurgeirsson, "but I actually think they could highlight their third-party developers more. The Nintendo Direct is a good showcase for their own titles, and then a few third-party titles get shown towards the end. They did something spectacular with *SteamWorld Dig* and a few other titles, but I believe they can tailor their broadcasts and »

"I think they could highlight their third-party developers more. The Nintendo Direct is a good showcase"


SteamWorld Dig earned healthy sales after a promotional slot during a Nintendo Direct broadcast. It's since been ported to PC, PS4 and Vita.


Platinum Games' *The Wonderful 101* features some of the most inventive uses of the GamePad to date, but still sold poorly.

Total Software Units Sold

- NES: **500.01 MILLION**
- GAME BOY: **501.11**
- SNES: **379.09**
- N64: **224.97**
- GBA: **377.42**
- GAMECUBE: **208.57**
- DS: **942.32**
- WII: **892.34**
- 3DS: **152.29**
- WII U: **29.37**



6 WAYS NINTENDO CAN SAVE ITSELF

1 GO MOBILE

Lorne Lanning: "If I were to go run Nintendo I think I'd be pushing it in an Android direction. I mean, it's kind of what Samsung did, right? Samsung [said] 'We're not going to build a whole smartphone division ourselves. Let's just ride on Google's.' Today we're facing a world where people expect more from every device. And I think that's a space that Nintendo could really capture. Historically, it's been the DS, but we live in a different world today where people expect their DS to talk to them and to have Google Maps on it."

2 DON'T GO MOBILE

Rhodri Broadbent: "Regarding [publishing games on] iOS, I hope no one is saying that any more. The iOS market is hard for everyone, and to try and transfer the immediacy of classic Nintendo button-based gameplay to a touch-screen is to remove the majority of those games' appeal. I don't think there is ever a reason to make your game worse."

3 LEVERAGE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Brjann Sigurgeirsson: "The 3DS community – and the Nintendo community in general – is more loyal than most. We know: since we self-publish our games, we work as hard as we can with social media. We try to think up interesting things on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. And still we have a lot more Miiverse followers for *SteamWorld Dig* than in all other media combined. And all we did there was basically to set up the page. I was surprised when I saw the figures."

4 BE MORE OPEN

Dan Pearce: "As a developer, I'd really like to see an effort to make the application process seem easy and inviting. 'Here are some of our developer relations people, here are the tools that you can use to develop for Wii U and 3DS, here is how we will help spotlight your content on our platforms, and here are some of the developers that we've signed up for 2014/2015 so far.' No more 'We can tell you this, we can't tell you this, there are things we can offer you but only after you sign an NDA.' Nintendo have a few great developers signed up already, it'd be terrific for them to show exactly why."

5 RELEASE UNIQUE EXCLUSIVES

Dan Pearce: "As a gamer, I'd like to see a bunch of really inventive titles that could only work on Wii U, games that make me want to buy the system for more than just the Nintendo exclusives, as good as they are."

6 DON'T MAKE GAMES FOR OTHER FORMATS

Rhodri Broadbent: "That's a short-sighted, self-destructive attitude. Homogeny is the enemy. The last thing we want is everyone doing the same thing in games. Nintendo has a history of some tremendous mixes of hardware and software, from the Zapper to the GameBoy Pocket Camera to *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat* and *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*. To take away their strength and creativity in hardware development is to take away what makes them Nintendo. Just as it's important that the games industry has healthy competition between platforms, and that some companies push technological boundaries in pursuit of new gameplay, it's important that Nintendo continues to push the gameplay boundaries in their own distinct, mad-toymaker way."



One problem the Wii U has faced is convincing casual consumers that it's a new console and not a peripheral.

> "I don't know what its next steps are – but I wouldn't bet against Nintendo"

the eShop even more towards third-party titles." Sigurgeirsson believes that Nintendo doesn't need to promote its own titles so vigorously, since the community will likely pick up Nintendo titles anyway. "Showcasing third-party titles means better sales for third-party developers, which makes for more successful developers on the eShop, which in turn means that more devs will come to the eShop to try their luck."

Part of the reason more developers haven't come Nintendo platforms stems from a perception that the company is unapproachable – indeed, Pearce says he's heard from large and small studios alike that "they aren't tremendously good communicators". With Sony in particular making a strong public show of its support for indie developers, it may simply be a case that Nintendo needs to make more of a fuss of what it has quietly achieved without media coverage. "They are at all the right shows," says Rhodri Broadbent, "And the Unity deal is a great way to bring in more games – and they did that early, too. Could they shout about it more loudly? I think that's a cultural thing, and I guess that might prevent some developers from feeling that they are being suitably courted by Nintendo, which would be a shame. But from our experience, we saw the system, approached them with the idea, and got on with it. It strikes me this is all that's really needed."

Evidently, Nintendo still has a long road ahead of it, and it's arguably not until the end of the year that we'll have a clearer picture of whether or not the changes it is implementing are too little, too late, and whether its new software and hardware can change the tide of public opinion. Either way, it's too soon to be reading the last rites for Wii U. "Everyone was starting to write [Nintendo] off, and then the Wii hit," recalls Lorne Lanning. "And not long after that, it was the most successful entertainment company in history. I don't know what its next steps are, but – I've said this before – I wouldn't bet against Nintendo."



LIFE IN A DAY



We've given birth to them, nurtured them through existence and watched them shuffle off this mortal coil. But now Maxis is bringing to life the world of The Sims like never before. With exclusive access to The Sims 4, games™ spends a day in the life of a Sim

In the beginning there was Sim and it was to be sculpted in the image of its creator. But what of this almighty deity's own parentage? Was its father a slim, erudite gentleman cultivating a tidy soul patch and sporting a beret? Was its mother a frumpy Hispanic lady with a well-meaning perm? Wait, that doesn't sound right. **games™** doesn't need to postulate on this existential quandary for too long; inside Maxis' Redwood City studio we find *The Sims 4* endeavouring to answer that question before our own very eyes. We're tinkering inside the sequel's character creation suite (Create-A-Sim mode; largely where *The Sims* experience begins for most players) and find that, after we've tweaked and sculpted our character, the game takes a punt at visualising the Sim's parents. The outcome is horrifically fashionable and downright laughable due to the in-game logic. In generating the character's genetic make-up, the game takes into account not only the physical properties of your own creation but also its fashion sense and attitude.

You see *The Sims 4* isn't just about directing soulless vessels to enact whichever menial task you have queued up for them today. It's about integrating a sense of personality and purpose into each denizen of the virtual world, making each feel unique to the other in the way they appear, behave and interact with their surroundings. Given that *The Sims* has defined the simulator genre over the years, it's a testament to the studio's ambition that it continues to push the legacy of its franchise into more interesting directions. As we delve deeper into the game's creation tools, we find that it's not just a logical progression of what has come before it, but a much more complex and deep simulator at the core of the experience.

"It's the Create-A-Sim we've always wanted to make," enthuses Maxis' Rachel Franklin, VP and general manager at the studio. "We've completely revamped our creative tools. Our Create-A-Sim is now tactile, it's powerful, and it allows you to create unique Sims with personality. It's not about what they look like but who they are on the inside." In one example we're shown a Sim being customised with a walk that endows him with a self-confident swagger; another Sim is tailored with a dainty stroll. These miniscule details are implemented to let anyone gain a snapshot of each Sim's personality when viewed even from the game's widest camera perspectives.

But, as it's pointed out to us, this is still superficial. Further defining your character is the option to define its traits and long-time goals. You're able to select an aspiration, which then gives you three traits to choose from. Here's a clear disparity in the previous systems. Whereas in previous games in the series your Sims would mostly obey your omnipotent commands, occasionally throwing a temper tantrum if the fridge was on the fritz or their bladder was in desperate need of relieving, here their traits define how they'll approach a situation. There's both a broad and astonishingly specific series of traits that can be paired with your Sim, each interlocking with your chosen aspiration. Intend to pursue a lifelong path of knowledge? Then your chosen traits might be computer whiz, nerd brain and renaissance kid. These would then unlock specific interactions with other like-minded Sims, while also enabling your Sim to learn certain skills faster.

Of course, you might opt to take a less determined approach. There are other traits that reflect social anxieties and personality quirks, the idea being to create organically dynamic scenarios with those that populate your neighbourhood. "*In Sims 4* we've gone back to the Sims themselves," states senior producer Lyndsay Pearson. "We're giving you the ability to create and control these Sims that have emotions and purpose and really tell different stories. What you create and who you create influences what you can do and where you can go."



Willow Creek is a location you might expect to find in a Disney film. Even without the perceptible air of whimsy that surrounds the quaint township in perpetual wholesomeness, there's elegance to its design that creates a sense of style that has been absent from the series' mundane apple-pie-suburban-America locales to date.

Take a look at *The Sims 3* today and much of its landscape is flat and lifeless, its colours cluttered and noisy, its features bleeding into one another. By comparison, Willow Creek (the first of five districts revealed to date) is bustling with interesting focal points and architecture that draws the player into its grasp. The tonal touchstone here is Southern American states, evoking the lush green bayou of Mississippi, and the enrapturing gaze of New Orleans' colourful streets at night. Its houses stretch out with wide porches, tethered to tall buildings by thin wooden columns.

It's not just the Sims that have been endowed with personality, it's the world itself, now brought to life with an endearing sense of identity. "It's more thought out and more designed," says lead »



Only one of the game's many locations has been revealed. A clutch more are to be unveiled up until the game's release, each distinct in tone.

concept artist, and all-round hyper-enthusiasm machine, Albert Truong, talking up the craftsmanship of the world. "There's more thought put into the textures; more thought put into the details of objects like trees. We're not really using photos [of trees]; we're actually designing them, giving them a little bit of character."

In the gaze of sunlight (unremitting as *The Sims* continues to not include a weather system) it's a blissful hamlet both larger than anything that has come before and, in its own way more intimate. For the first time, you might feel obliged just to take a confident stroll around the block (or dainty stroll if that's your chosen walk), absorbing the architectural nuance and immaculate balance of colours and features that make it feel like a legitimate location.

It's not the only one, either. We press Truong about how other districts will continue to diversify the *Sims* universe: "You've seen the colour palettes, that's what is distinctive about [the districts]," he coyly answers. "Each district will have its own colour palette. In *The Sims 3*, they all kind of looked the same, but here each will have its own colour palette. One might be lush and green; another might be warm and orange. You'll be able to tell apart the different areas of it."

> "We wanted the feeling of playing with blocks"

We spot a drawing on a nearby whiteboard of a humble rural shack, surrounded by rolling farmland, livestock and mountains in the distance. Could the American frontier be another location in *The Sims 4*? Truong and his colleagues refuse to comment. But it's a clear indicator that wherever else Maxis is taking its simulator, the world of *The Sims* is about to get much bigger. Expansion has always been a cornerstone of the franchise, though. From the humble foundations of your one-bedroom apartment to the construction of an imposing mansion that dominates the region, *The Sims* is just as much about leaving your own mark on the world as it is assimilating with it.

Certainly the aim here is to widen the tools with which the player can imprint something of their own personality into their designated allotment. Following from Create-A-Sim, the next step is Build Mode, where players are able to put their architectural knowledge to the test. The big difference here is the continuation of the tactile philosophy that forms the bedrock of the new approach to character creation. Rooms can be pinched and stretched to fit your creative whims, while the rest of your abode intelligently snaps into position, recognising quick iterations and structural changes you've implemented. However, it's the small enhancements that really emphasise the flexibility of the new system. Simple additions such as the ability to individually place windows and adjust their height; raising the foundations of your building; roofs behaving like other rooms (with changes to curvature and other adjustments made on the fly). Whereas in *The Sims 3* it often felt like you had to have a precise vision in place before you began building, *The Sims 4* is about letting your creativity run rampant.

"What we really wanted to capture is the feeling of playing with blocks as a kid," reveals veteran *The Sims* designer John Berges, imparting sage-like wisdom as we haplessly try to erect a two-story townhouse that somehow looks like an aircraft hangar. "[In *The Sims 4*] you can pick stuff up, move them around – the game is always going to adapt to what you do, it's not going to tell you to do anything – and you can keep placing things. It's really about exploring the possibilities and letting that guide your creativity. It should be fun to make mistakes." Without sacrificing the depth that was already present (such as the wall tool or basic decoration tools), instead it's about stripping back the routine and making it both exciting and accessible. More interesting is how the studio is giving the player the power to circumvent the entire build process entirely.

The Sims Exchange was an overlooked feature of *The Sims 3*, enabling players to share their creations online and, in a convoluted process, download and place buildings and items into their own game. It's a feature that has been promoted as a major tenet of *The Sims 4*, here titled Gallery, allowing players to simply browse the online catalogue and select fully-formed structures to be placed straight into their game. But even on a smaller level, those that don't have any particular flair for interior design can furnish their house with any of the game's Styled Rooms. These are created by Maxis; a selection of top-to-bottom decorated rooms that can be slotted together like building blocks.

There's a significant portion of *The Sims* fanbase that simply enjoy the game for the simulation rather than incessant tinkering but Maxis aren't ignoring the potential risk of these features nerfing creativity. "I'm hoping that players who are uncomfortable with Build Mode – who maybe found it a bit daunting in *The Sims 3* – will use styled rooms and manipulate rooms and that will get







One of the big enhancements is the ability to precisely tweak to features of rooftops. *The Sims 4* is all about expanding the toolset to offer vast creative freedom.

them into Build Mode," says Berges. "I want everyone who plays *The Sims 4* to be building."

It's hard not to get caught up in the studio's enthusiasm for creation in *The Sims 4* and it's a testament to the sheer volume of augmented options that the thought of getting your hands dirty in the sandbox remains alluring. While initially being liberated from the shackles of drawing simple lines and working within the rigid parameters that previously existed can be confusing, there's no question that the process is much more gratifying. Even as we stare at what we'd describe as the Frankenstein's Monster of houses that currently sits on the end of a tidy cul-de-sac in Willow Creek, it's encouraging that all its quirks and flawed design options weren't caused by limitations but the exact opposite.

Each district in *The Sims 4* is comprised of three regions: residential, commercial and community. Maxis' goal was for each of these areas is to dispense with zones isolated in purpose, but for each to cater for multiple activities. Stepping outside of our Sim's house, we're surrounded by lush willow trees, a river flows directly past the backyard and the rattling of a train heading into the industrial district can be heard in the near distance. Much like *The Sims 3*, the local area will be packed with fossils, treasure and other hidden artefacts to be discovered, but there are also your neighbours and people walking around.

"*The Sims 4* is a great game for people watching," smiles producer Grant Rodiek. "One of the things I love about *The Sims 4* is that we've generally taken the approach that we should enrich the simulator in general. We should enrich the Sims and everything about how they look. One of the things I love is that you can tell someone's emotions just by looking at them; you can tell what type of person they are."

Our Sim is feeling slightly peeved right now. He's still reeling from a heated exchange he had with a bedraggled homeless man »

4 ABANDONED SIMS EXPANSION PACKS

games™ takes a look at The Sims expansion packs that didn't make the cut over the years

The Sims Illegal Gambling Pack

You've no doubt grown attached to that cute little puppy you've raised in *The Sims Pets*, right? Well then you'll love seeing your beloved companions battling it out in an illegal dog fight. If you're not fond of bloodsport then there are plenty of other options, including shady basement card games and good ol' fashioned alleyway dice rolling. And don't worry about money: just get a loan shark to lend you some cash…

The Sims Sexual Health Clinic

You're a young Sim-about-town, but what happens when woo-hoo turns into boo-hoo? Fear not, because The Sims Sexual Health Clinic brings to life the whole undignified process of having yourself diagnosed and silently judged by a room of medical professions. Experience all new dynamic social interactions as you have to break the news to previous partners that they have to get checked out. Relive the experience week-after-week as you refuse to learn from your mistakes.

The Sims Pets Cemetery

Much like *The Sims* themselves, no creature that roams the virtual planes can avoid the cold grasp of the grim reaper. But why say goodbye to your beloved pets? With the Pets Cemetery expansion a quick satanic ritual will bring Rover, Snowball and all their friends back from the grave and back into your loving embrace. Watch as your once cherished pets decompose before your very eyes and never miss an opportunity to feast on your living flesh.

The Sims Antisocial Pack

Tired of having of people always knocking on your door, ringing you up and generally just wanting to get all in your face being 'nice' and 'pleasant'. Well, you can say goodbye to all that geniality with The Sims Antisocial Pack. With a new range of options to alienate your friends, excuses such as 'I'm feeling a bit under the weather today' and 'I think I'm busy on that date' are part of an extensive repertoire of options to avoid grating social interaction. Includes a menacing scarecrow for your home.

Each of the neighbourhoods now feature social areas where Sims can interact with each other. These will include activities for Sims to partake in.



Familiar characters will return – such as the Goths – while Maxis is expanding the sequel with new eccentric Sims.

in the park earlier that day. Previously in *The Sims* when you had a negative emotional reaction to someone, you could often flip those feeling back into positive after a few canny dialogue choices. Here, things are much more pervasive. Not only will your Sims hold a grudge, but the impact of those interactions will have a direct effect on the way that your Sim continues to behave with the world around it. We've seen before how emotions can create a range of unique interactions with items in the world (in this case a red indicator on gym equipment enables the Sim to perform angry reps) but it also enables other Sims to have distinctive exchanges tied to its feelings. More so, two Sims that share the same trait can energise each other through conversation and actions.

The neighbourhood will always provide new dynamic relationship opportunities to engage with and there will be focal points within the community that drive together the locals. It could be a children's climbing frame shaped like a pirate ship that sits in the centre of a small grass patch surrounded by houses, or a BBQ pit that sits on the edge of the riverbank. Rather than having to switch between regions to satisfy the type of interactions you want to have, each area is crafted to support a diverse range of activities. Still, we drop into the commercial district to check out what's on offer. Our Sim heads to the gym, but there's a nearby museum and library that also offer a range of recreational activities that Sims can engage with either solo and, yes, even in a group.

"When your Sim starts out, your Sim doesn't have a lot of money," says Rodiek. "They might want to do stuff and it's not really fun to sit at home and stare at the wall. I remember getting out of college – it wasn't a whole lot of fun. So what we have are venues where you can go and meet people and use all sorts of cool, exciting objects that you can't afford at home."

After a shower that energises our Sim's workout session, she takes to a treadmill. *The Sims 4* strives to create social situations that, for all intents and purposes, reflect real life; the goal being to dispense with the static and limited interactions that previously existed in favour of something more organic. So this allows our Sim to flirt with another gym patron while getting her workout on and elsewhere, she enjoys soaking in the history of a gothic museum with the Goth family patriarch.

"One of things we wanted to do in *The Sims 4* that we haven't done very well in the past was to completely restructure the AI so that when you go to places they actually behave like they're supposed to," Rodiek explains. "They act like they're at the gym; they act like they're at a nightclub; they act like they're at a library. And what this does is create very realistic situations."

> "We wanted to completely restructure the AI"

Much of what has been achieved has been a gradual clean-up of the game's mechanics and systems. The studio emphasises that this enables the Sims' personality to take precedence and, indeed, there's certainly more freedom of personal expression. But there's also a noticeable clarity to the interface, menus driven by simplicity without compromising comprehensiveness (Rodiek reckons there's 80% less UI than in *The Sims 3*, but can't confirm that). When building and decorating property, a new search bar function enables players to quickly find the items they're looking for without having to figure out their nebulous classification. Elsewhere, we're given a quick demonstration of how to put together a party: set-up an

The Making of The Sims 4

games™ chats to Maxis' VP and general manager Rachel Franklin, senior producer Lyndsay Pearson and producer Ryan Vaughn about the evolution of The Sims

What have been the major developments since the game's announcement almost a year ago?
Franklin: [The fans] have had pretty deep exposure when we ran the Sims Camp last year. We had about 40 people that were exposed to Build Mode (that wasn't at Gamescom) and the purpose was to get them deeply into it. They loved the features, even the little enhancements like spandrels. It's those details that they get very excited about. So really, we've been finding out how Build Mode felt, what it's like to place a room down. We've been refining that experience and spending our time on making sure it feels great.

Pearson: In addition to that, it has been opening up that vibrant neighbourhood we've been talking about and all those opportunities out there. We've been looking at all the potential out there and we've been getting a lot of positive feedback. Pushing that forward was definitely something we've spent a lot of time on since the announcement.

How have you made the world more unified than in previous *Sims* games?
Pearson: We wanted these places to feel very real and believable just like the way we invest in the Sims themselves. You want the commercial district to feel like it could be just down the street from your house. You want to feel like that's an actual believable place. So you'll that theme throughout the different neighbourhoods that'll tie that theme together. It makes it clear why you see that same guy down the bar that you saw in the park earlier that day – it feels like one connected place.







Vaughn: We had those really big open worlds in *The Sims 3* and while they were great they often felt sparse and empty. We really wanted to hone on that experience and tie it back to *The Sims*. We wanted to make sure that those relationships you're having – whether with your neighbour or the guy down the street – felt natural. You go across the street and meet the mailman and strike up a conversation and then later you'll see him at the bar playing piano. It's a lot of fun and bringing that sense of community has been a key push.

What sort of opportunities does this wider neighbourhood offer on a gameplay level?
Pearson: The fact that you could take your Sim out at any point and go to the park, you could get there and there's a different person each time and that person is going to have a different emotion and a different story to tell. It's something you see a lot in pop culture and in movies, that magic moment where someone meets and their lives change forever. It's that kind of thing where Sims are going to run into each other and they'll have things going on in their lives and bounce off them in interesting ways. That's going to be different each time you go out into that world; each time you go into that park or into a bar. You'll get to see that continuity. One day there will be a sad girl crying on the bench, the next day she'll be strolling along happy or really confident and you can jump into that story and decide to learn more or just watch it happen.

Vaughn: In previous iterations you could have an interaction that was negative between two Sims and ten minutes later they are best friends. With emotions and then combine that with new neighbourhoods, you get into a fight with your neighbour one day and then tomorrow you head down to the park and they're there too and they're in that angry mood against each other. Their relationship »

state persists through the day and is reflected in a way that is much more natural and believable.

Franklin: I want to point out that the player control is all there. Even though we're allowing for these wonderful situations to happen outside in the neighbourhood or in your home, it's to give the player – who is actively driving their Sim – just different opportunities to story tell with. What about for the insular players who like to keep things about their own creations.

How have you catered for them?
Pearson: The combinations we've talked about, the way you set their personalities, set their traits, that for the people who want to play within their little story, that changes the way you strategise what you want to do there and the choices you make on that path. So if you want to tell the story of the tortured painter, you can make the gloomy Sim who is also a loner but very creative. You can spend his days refining his skills and getting him in the mood to make sure he's painting the best possible paintings. Only inviting certain people to be his friends so they help him in certain ways; bringing in other artists that are highly skilled to mentor him – you can use all of those influences to tell any size story. If you want it to be the epic across-neighbourhood story you can, but if you want it to be focused on your Sim and its family then it's about the dynamics between them.

How are you making sure that all these ready-made homes won't inspire builder apathy, considering their depth and range?
Pearson: We see players inspiring each other regularly. In the forum they set daily challenges – it's one of the most inspiring parts of our community. I think a lot of it will be them driving each other to try new things. We see them drawing inspiration from pop culture events and things going on in the world, so because it's a game about life they pull inspiration from everywhere.



Emotions will reflect in activities and hobbies. For example, feeling sad might just provide the inspiration your Sim needs to create a work of art.

How would you guys say the simulation genre has evolved since the last game?
Franklin: As far as the simulation genre is concerned, when we were talking about those need states – creativity, humour and the escape – there really is no other game that satisfies those as deeply as *The Sims* does. We do put time and passion into making the best creation tools, the best life simulation and our sharing experience – all of these things together are a unique experience. I would venture to say that there's no other game like *The Sims*.



You can now browse for furniture in an Ikea-like catalogue (complete with search function). You're even able to find pre-designed rooms that you can buy and simply drop into your Sim's house. If only real life were this easy.



Create-A-Sim mode has been overhauled, enabling players to tweak, stretch and customise characters in a new intuitive fashion, without compromising on the little details. Maxis aimed for a Pixar-like look to the character models in the game.

event type (be it a party, date or wedding) and select guests from a contact book (these can fill roles such as bartender or supply music). You can even outline random objectives to be fulfilled at the event (such as socialising with a certain number of guests).

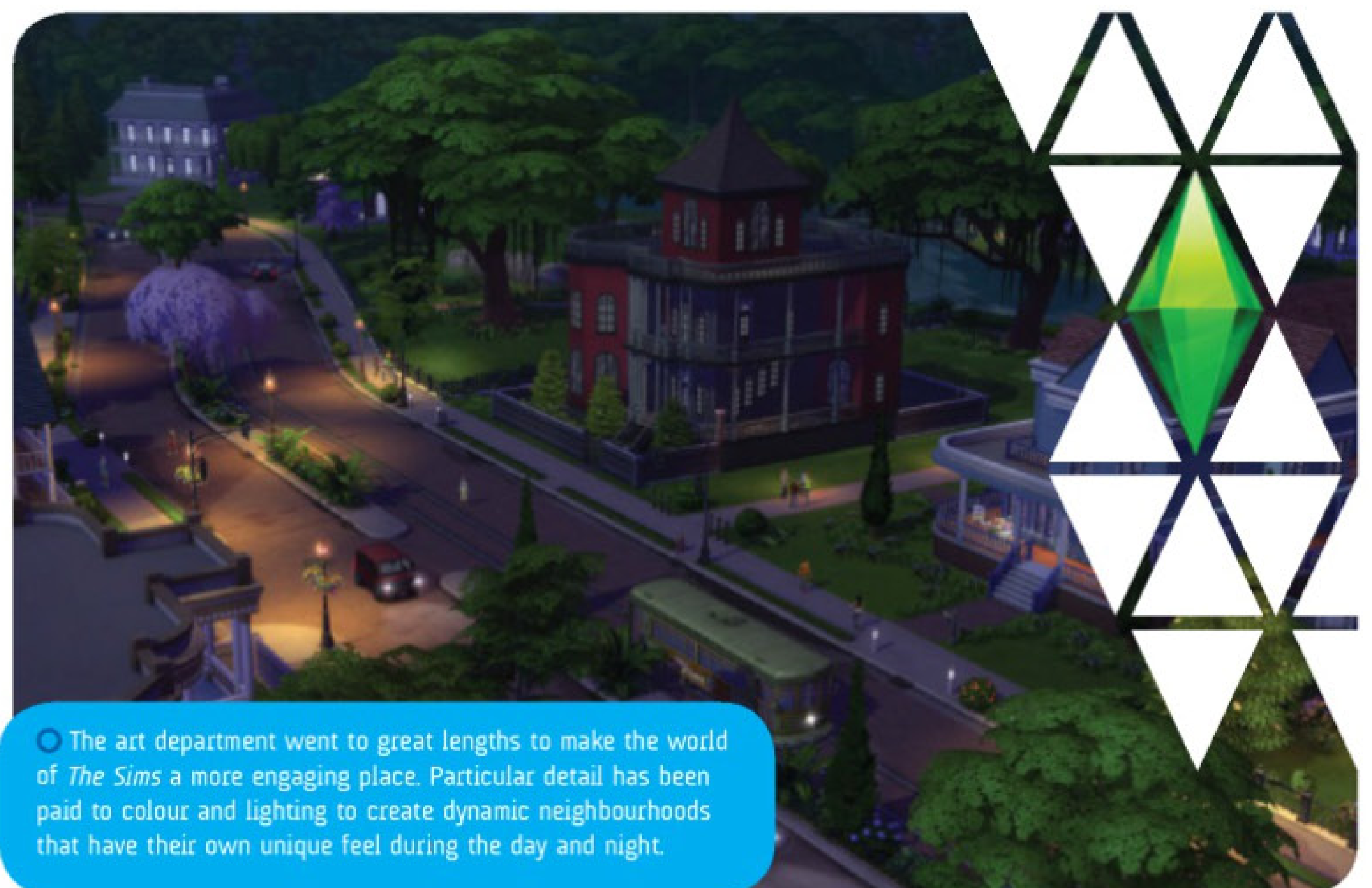
But it wouldn't be a party without a little drama and as the night draws in and our day with *The Sims 4* comes to a close we're given another glimpse into some of the interesting ways that the Sims will interact with one another. "You actually have two different relationship tracks in *The Sims 4*," reveals Ryan Vaughn, producer on *The Sims 4*. "Not only do you have a friendship track but you also have a romantic track. This is what is allowing us to have brand new relationship types in *The Sims 4*. We have these amazing brand new Sim-to-Sim interactions." We're shown an example. Our Sim starts talking to its introverted flatmate. While their friendship track is in the red, indicating the two are enemies, the romance track is high, meaning that the two are in an amusing state of being 'enemies with benefits.'

By now the party is in full swing: the homeless guy that terrorised our Sim the previous day has somehow found himself a tuxedo and is socialising in one corner, while Elton John (not an official character) plays the piano on the other side of the room. Some people of dancing, a group of five are having what appears to be a compelling conversation, while a pair of guests of watching television while Kim Jong-Un observes. Wait. Kim Jong-Un – who invited that guy? We let bygones be bygones with the homeless guy, but we draw the line at communist dictators. Our Sim moves towards the supreme leader of North Korea, throws a drink in his face and gets into a scuffle.

As the camera pans back and we watch the rest of Willow Creek get on with its daily life, it's clear that *The Sims 4* is succeeding in creating life in a torrent of chaos and complexity. When *The Sims 4* launches in September this year, it'll engage with its audience in richer and more rewarding ways than the series has ever come close to before. We decided to hit the gym, pick a fight with a nefarious dictator and build a hideous aircraft hangar. But in *The Sims 4*, much like life, the possibilities are endless.







The art department went to great lengths to make the world of *The Sims* a more engaging place. Particular detail has been paid to colour and lighting to create dynamic neighbourhoods that have their own unique feel during the day and night.

“You’re not constrained by a short view-distance; you can see stars and planets”



NEW FRONTIERS

Thirty years after the original, Elite is returning, and in a big way

The first thing you see when launching the latest alpha of *Elite Dangerous* is a Coriolis Starport. Fitting, as it is upon docking in these space stations that *Elite Dangerous*' scope really hits you, both in terms of its scale and its attention to detail. Target the slowly revolving Cuboctahedron (eight triangular faces, six square), which is perhaps twenty kilometres from your current position, and you can request docking permission, upon which you are assigned a specific landing platform. Then you gun the engines of your small and nimble Sidewinder Spacefighter, and the craft shudders and vibrates as the thrusters propel it forward.

Gradually the station grows in your vision, until it encompasses your entire cockpit window. You fly over the metallic surface of the station searching for the entrance; a small rectangular slit protected by a blue force-field and lined with holographic advertising billboards. Carefully you reduce your speed, adjust your position and deploy your landing gear. The entrance is worryingly narrow, but a Sidewinder is small enough to fly through sideways.

Inside, the station is reminiscent of an airport. Wheeled trucks and trailers ferry cargo and luggage along predefined lanes, and announcements regarding safety procedure echo through the cylindrical space. The only difference is landing pads occupy every single surface, the floor, walls and ceiling (relative to your position). Each docking bay has its own holographic number, and you must locate yours, nudge your craft into position before carefully descending onto the landing pad. From here you can access the stations' trading menu, the shipyard, and upgrade and weapons stores.

It's such a simple act, pretty pedestrian in the scale of things, and yet *Elite Dangerous* makes docking a wonderfully tactile experience that has you engaging with the game at every moment. But what's most important to note about the above is this is a single station orbiting one planet in one solar system, in a game where the ultimate goal is to let you explore every single star in the entire Milky Way.

"*Elite* and *Frontier* really pushed the boundaries in terms of what fitted," says David Braben, co-creator of *Elite* and founder of Frontier Developments. We're sat in his air-conditioned office on a visit to the studio in Cambridge, on what is undoubtedly the warmest day of the year so far »

Constant communication with the community and regular feedback has been essential to the continued developerment of *Elite: Dangerous*.

"*Elite* had two thousand star systems, where actually the star systems were the same as the number of stars anyway, whereas *Frontier* had ten to the power eleven star systems. What we have now is very rich in terms of how it does all the detail. But the idea is it follows on from where *Frontier* was."

Released in 1984, *Elite* defined the space-trading genre. From *Freelancer* to *EVE Online*, virtually any game with a spaceship in it owes a debt to *Elite*. It was also a remarkably successful game in its own right, selling approximately 600,000, and featured on platforms such as the Micro, the Commodore, the Spectrum, even the NES.

The 1993 sequel, *Frontier*, was even more ambitious, but its success was hindered by the publisher GameTek, who pushed it out of the door too early. Ever since then Braben and his development team have struggled with the developer/publisher relationship. Frontiers' post-millennium output has been robust but unspectacular. *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3*, *Kinectimals*, *Zoo Tycoon*. Well made games, but unlikely to be remembered as classics. Meanwhile, development of a fourth *Elite* game has been on and off since 1998, with a knowledge that any publisher-led deal would inevitably involve compromises Braben was unwilling to make.

"It's the sort of game where there are a lot of pressures to make it like another game. And that's not to say that's necessarily wrong, per se. The worrying, the perceived risk when you're trying to plan something, and they say 'Oh *GTA* is very successful, make it more like that,'" Braben explains. "The other thing is, you end up making the game for an audience. They say, 'We want you to aim for 18-25 year old males in America.' And then I find, not that you don't appeal to those people, but when you end up with a very narrow, prescribed audience, you can't make decisions for yourself. You have to look at focus groups or whatever of those individuals to make sure you're hitting the mark.'

"It's the sort of game where there are a lot of pressures to make it like another game"

Almost overnight everything changed. The combination of the Kickstarter revolution and the emergence of the paid-alpha model offered Frontier the ideal alternative development method it needed to launch a new *Elite*. But a decade and a half of speculation had made both players and press understandably sceptical about the prospect of a new *Elite*, and Frontier didn't help itself when their initial Kickstarter pledge appeared to have nothing to offer aside from nostalgia. This was despite the fact that back in the office, Frontier already had a functioning version of the game playing over a LAN.

Those presentational missteps cost Frontier a good amount of trust, but there was enough for *Dangerous* to reach its lofty Kickstarter goal of 1.25 million (exceeding it by another £350,000) Frontier has since committed to justifying the belief of its backers. Every development target has been met







Each ship cockpit is different. The Mark III Cobra has an additional seat. One day we hope it's filled with a cooperative player.





The docking process is completely seamless and will be fully controlled by the player, so it's all on you if you crash and burn.



with clockwork precision, while the game has taken shape with impressive speed. This is because of that groundwork laid during those years *Dangerous* was quietly worked on in the background.

"The most important thing is we've been building the technology," Braben states. "There are a lot of things that you need to deliver a game like this. Everything from 64-bit architecture, and the ability to do full-on 64 bit locations. So you're not constrained by a really short view-distance, but you can see stars and planets which are huge, and yet you can still see things in the foreground." Contrary to how the situation might have appeared when buzz around *Elite Dangerous* began circulating in late 2012, Frontier is prepared, equipped, and dedicated to seeing the project through to the end. Only two questions remain; what is it like to play, and how good will the end product likely be?

The first of these questions is easy enough to answer. *Dangerous* already feels extremely good to play. This is because Frontier has been careful about ensuring the basic mechanics work before looking toward the more ambitious stuff. The first couple of Alphas, for example, focused entirely on ship interiors and space combat. "We're building the game from the player's experience outwards," Braben points out. "We're making sure the things the player does work well, feel solid."

Immersion is a big factor in *Dangerous*. It is played entirely from first-person, with you looking out of the intricately detailed cockpit of whatever craft you're flying. Menus for navigation and managing your ships' status are housed within the cockpit, and can be brought up by turning your head in-game toward them using a separate control (or head-tracking if you're using a VR device like the Oculus Rift, which *Dangerous* fully supports). The cockpit window also gives you a 180 degree view of the surrounding space. This is useful for both navigation and combat, as enemy ships can attack you from various angles, and it's important to keep track of their direction.

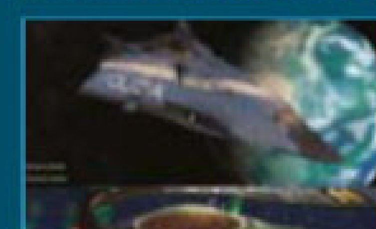
Speaking of combat, *Dangerous*' dogfighting strongly evokes the classic *X-Wing* and *TIE-Fighter* games. Turn rate is deliberately slower than you might expect, and also varies depending on your speed (with around 50% acceleration being the optimum rate for combat). This means you can't simply spin around chasing your enemy in an endless circle of death. Instead, you need to use space to your advantage; accelerate into the inky void for a few kilometres, decelerate, turn, and come in for a strafing run. If you can latch onto their tail at that point, so much the better. If not, it's time to try something else. To aid your tactics, power can be allocated to different parts of the ship, namely systems, engines, and weapons. If you're being attacked, you'll want most of your power in your systems to charge your shields, or in your engines so you can escape.

All these different systems come together to make combat an absorbing and satisfying experience. It's also spectacular. Lasers and machine guns flash against shields, and scorch great holes in your opponent's hull when those shields eventually fail. If it's you on the defensive, your cockpit sparks and your »

FRONTIER'S DEVELOPMENT

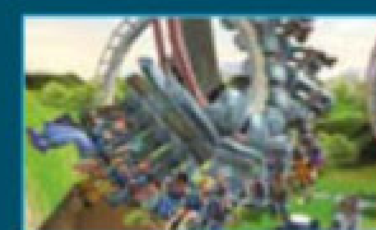
FOUNDED AFTER THE COMPLETION OF ELITE II, FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS HAS PRODUCED A WIDE VARIETY OF GAMES OVER ITS TWENTY-YEAR HISTORY

1995: FRONTIER: FIRST ENCOUNTERS



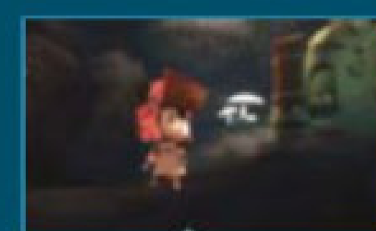
The third game in the *Elite* series was the first designed primarily for the PC. It continued the focus on trading, fighting and exploration, but added a central storyline. But *First Encounters* was released early by the publisher, and as a result the game was heavily criticised for being buggy and unfinished. It spelled the end of the *Elite* series for twenty years.

2004: ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON 3



Perhaps Frontier's most notable non-*Elite* game, *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3* took Chris Sawyer's amusement park-building masterpiece and transferred it successfully into 3D. Like the other games, it focused on the construction of complex custom coasters, and fleecing your customers as much as you could short of physically assaulting them.

2008: LOSTWINDS



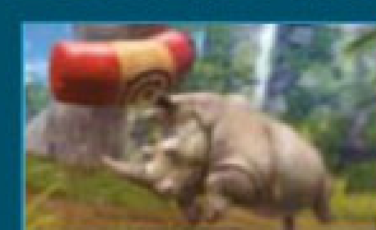
The first of Frontier's forays into designing games for motion-controls, *LostWinds* is a side-scrolling platformer in which you manipulate the environment by harnessing the wind, pushing around characters and objects with great sweeps of the Wiimote. LostWinds is generally regarded as one of the better games to make use of the Wii's motion controls.

2010: KINECTIMALS



A launch game for Microsoft's Kinect peripheral, *Kinectimals* let you raise, play with and fondle a variety of ludicrously cute animals. With a host of minigames and an idyllic island for you to explore with your pixel-pet, outside of *Kinect Sports*, *Kinectimals* was probably the title that made best use of the somewhat underwhelming motion control device.

2013: ZOO TYCOON



Frontier's contribution to the Xbox One launch releases saw their return to the god-game genre, this time focusing entirely on containing large and dangerous animals in cages for your punters to ogle and annoy by tapping on the glass. Again, it was regarded as one of the better launch games for the Xbox One, with some decent simulation mechanics and an appeal for all ages, despite a lack of depth to the game.

SIDEWINDER

The ugly duckling of *Dangerous*' spacecraft, the Sidewinder is the starting ship for all players. With a couple of hardpoints and a small cargo hold for trading, it enables you to do a little of everything, but it won't be long before you clamour for something a little more upmarket.



SHIPSHAPE AND CAMBRIDGE FASHION

A rundown of a few of the 25 ships you'll be able to fly in Elite Dangerous





EAGLE

The Eagle is a purebred fighter craft., faster and with more hardpoints than the Sidewinder, but with no cargo hold to speak of, it is the X-Wing of the *Elite* universe.

COBRA MARK III

The Cobra is a second-tier assault craft, with a large number of hardpoints and a considerably larger cargo hold, it's like a sidewinder on steroids. It's cockpit also has two seats, which gives us dreams of flying around space with Elite's equivalent of Chewbacca.

window cracks when you start taking damage, and your ship's VI informs you with unnerving calmness about broken systems and ship integrity.

Piloting ships does take a little getting used to, but it can be grasped within about half an hour. *Dangerous* straddles the line nicely between the satisfaction of simulation and the accessibility of arcade. It's a complicated game, but not an unreasonably difficult one. That said, skill will play a significant role in combat, because *Dangerous* is a massively multiplayer game. Consequently knowing the capabilities of your ship, and being able to read another player's movements, will give you an advantage.

"One of the issues with *Elite Dangerous* of course is sometimes the enemy will be another player," Braben points out. "We can't constrain that, we have to do it by the dynamics of the ship. We have to do it by how the ship accelerates, and also how you telegraph what it's doing. The reason the thrusters are so big and visible is because you want to make sure you can see 'Oh that guy's starting to jinx right', you've seen the thrusters on top of the ship firing. It's all readable, not just dashboard stuff. You don't want players forever looking at the scanner." Although *Dangerous* falls into the category of an MMO, it's by no means a traditional one. We're beginning to see the multiplayer elements of *Dangerous* come together in the latest Alpha build, which gives players an expanse of five solar systems to freely explore, each with its own planets, moons, economies, governments, combat zones, unique points of interest and hidden secrets.


Braben says that using crowd-sourcing and alpha testing has been a liberating experience for the veteran game developer.

Trading works much as how you would expect it to in a space simulator. Each system has its own economy type, which affects the prices, supply and demand of its goods. "Eranin is an agricultural one, so I can buy grain there quite low, because they have lots of grain," says producer Adam Woods, who guided us through the game's trading and travel systems. "But somewhere like an industrial one, I-Bootis for example, it won't have means to generate its own grain, so it's going to buy grain at quite a high price." The difference between *Dangerous* and, say, the original *Elite*, is that these economies will fluctuate depending on how players interact with them. "It's all served by our servers, the commodities and the prices are all aggregated, so it's not a per-person thing. If people take lots of one of the types of items out. It can disrupt the prices."

Interestingly, Frontier plan to expand trading beyond commodities. Woods shows us the galaxy map, which contains hundreds of thousands of star systems, all of which will eventually be explorable. But many of these systems will be entirely uncharted, allowing players to discover what lies in the far reaches of space, and perhaps even profit from that acquired knowledge.

"You could jump to unknown systems, map what's there, and then sell that information to other people," Woods says. Such a huge virtual universe is made possible by *Dangerous*' procedural generation algorithms. Procedural generation has always been a core component of *Elite*. It's how the original game managed to render 2,000 planets using just 16 kilobytes of RAM. *Dangerous* is in many ways doing the same thing, only taking advantage of thirty years of technological advancement. But it isn't a totally random seed every time. A certain amount of the content is hand-crafted, such as specific core systems and our own solar system, while all known exoplanets are included in the game.

> "We know what we're making. We know how we're making it. We've just got to make it"

The procedural component is present in the microscopic detail as well. Asteroid fields and the rings of Saturn-like planets are constructed from countless procedurally generated rocks. What you'll encounter in these galaxies is also procedurally generated, although Braben is keen to stress that there will be sufficient variation to ensure these different scenarios don't feel like they've been copied and pasted. "I think some 46 different encounter types exist in the game today. We expect there to be way more in the final game."

Cruising around the galaxy is quietly enjoyable, but it's never completely sedate. Strange signals may lead you into all kinds of trouble, while at any point you can be subject to "Interdiction", whereby you're violently wrenched out of Frameshift (a hyperspace jump) into some form of encounter. It might be you've unwittingly stumbled into a battlefield. It might be a band of pirates lusting after your cargo hold. Or something else entirely.

"Even we don't know what's there, because there are lots of different things that it could be," Braben says excitedly. These won't necessarily be AI encounters either. Interdiction is performed using a special device which players will be able to buy. Hence, player-pirates will be able to set traps for traders, while bounty hunters can plan ambushes to catch pirates. *Dangerous* is all about giving players a huge playground to explore and experiment with. But Frontier also wants these experiences to be rewarding without constraining its players' options. So you won't be funnelled down a specific storyline where each player is the "Chosen One" destined to save the universe a-la *Elder Scrolls Online*.

Instead, all players will be part of the player Federation at the game's outset and will be able to join other factions outlined in the galaxy's lore. As they increase in rank and meet certain conditions, this will open up further avenues. "Whenever someone reaches a particular ranking, then you might get approached to join a secret organisation if the following things are true," Braben clarifies. Similarly, while there will initially be twenty-five ships in the release version of the game, some of these will only become available to players through working for certain factions.

Frontier's plans are ambitious, especially when you consider that it intends the official release of the game to occur before the year is out. But when you look at what Frontier has already achieved with its meticulously planned Alpha stages, and the fact that this content is already fun and engaging, it suddenly seems a far more realistic prospect. Furthermore, Frontier's plans stretch far beyond that release date. Ultimately, Frontier wants every star, planet and moon to be available to players for exploration, yet even if these grandest of plans don't come into fruition, having an entire galaxy to explore in spacecraft could hardly be considered a poor compromise. This is the very least of what Frontier is committed to producing. Braben summarises to us: "We know what we're making. We know how we're making it. We've just got to make it." 



CHANGING THE GUARD

IN AN INDUSTRY WHERE TRADITIONAL DEVELOPERS ARE CLOSING DOWN DUE TO LACK OF FUNDS, AND PUBLISHERS ARE RUNNING RIOT WITH IN-HOUSE STUDIOS DOMINATING THE MARKET, WE EXAMINE WHAT WARGAMING.NET IS DOING TO STAY AHEAD OF THE COMPETITION, AND HOW IT'S FOUND SUCH F2P SUCCESS

WARGAMING.NET HAS FLOWN IN THE FACE OF RECESSION; THE ECONOMIC CRISIS HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR SHRINKAGE ELSEWHERE IN THE INDUSTRY, RESULTING IN BIGGER PUBLISHERS CLOSING SMALLER STUDIOS IN EFFORTS TO EXTEND THEIR PROFIT MARGINS. But Wargaming.net has managed not only to keep itself afloat, but find success in an area where a lot of other major publishers fall flat: free-to-play.

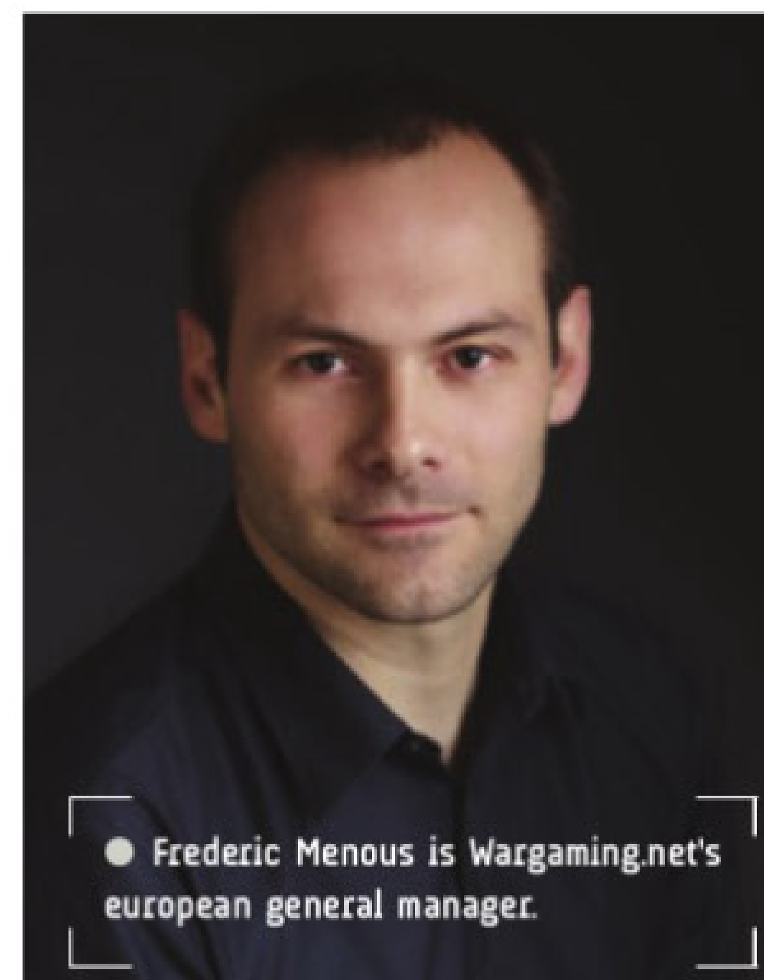
But it hasn't always been smooth sailing for the developer: Wargaming.net has been around since 1998, when it was founded by CEO Victor Kislyi – a long-time fan of tabletop Wargaming.net. Travelling between the Americas and Russia on a break from university, Kislyi discovered there was a fractured community of tabletop wargamers that lacked a central hub, whose passion was intense, but localised.

Enter Wargaming.net and Kislyi's first game – *DBA* – and the migration of the tabletop communities to the online realm. Long story short, Kisyli identified a vibrant community, and created content it could get behind. However, both he and the company understand that in the shaky ethical ground of the free-to-play market, a happy fanbase is a loyal one.

This time last year, Wargaming.net had one game on one platform – *World Of Tanks* on PC – and now it's a multiplatform company with three titles out in the wild. "When we opened [our European offices] three years ago, nobody knew us," explains Wargaming.net Europe's general manager, Frederic Menou. "We were going to banks, recruiting people, all that kind of stuff, we were doing that all ourselves. But we knew we could do it – we knew that it was a worthwhile investment. Now, we have 170 employees and we're receiving resumes from people in other games companies on a daily basis – it's our attitude and can-do spirit that's allowed this to happen." Menou himself earned his stripes as support services director at Blizzard Entertainment, before being promoted to European managing director at the *World Of Warcraft* developer (during the height of its subscription-based success), before heading to Wargaming.net to head up the Europe office in 2011.

"I've been around for a while in this industry," explains Menou, "and I've seen so many times people say 'this is *the* business model – this new way of doing things, this is *it*. For example, there were subscription-based games, and a couple of big companies have been extremely successful with them – so *everybody* wanted to move to subscription. It didn't work out, and now that business model is declining. Now we have free-to-play, and you see people moving into it, but I'm not sure that free-to-play – in its current state – is going to be the future as the predominant business model, because it might not be the best way to provide content for our customers." Menou then makes the point that free-to-play is basically a re-imagining of the shareware model that existed 16 years ago.

> "THE SHAREWARE BUSINESS MODEL WAS THE RIGHT IDEA, IT JUST HAPPENED TOO EARLY"
> WARGAMING.NET EUROPE GENERAL MANAGER, FREDERIC MENOU



Frederic Menous is Wargaming.net's european general manager.

"People want to play the game *now*," he explains. "It's a good deal for everyone, too: as developers, we instantly get feedback on what »



The studio prepares to launch *World Of Warships*, which sets to expand its brand to the seas.

Wargaming.net currently employes over 2800 members of staff across its global operations. That's the size of a small army, in case you're wondering.

» the players want, on what else they would like to see, of what is and isn't working. The players can also choose whether they want to spend money or not – you play for a while, you don't like it, you don't have to spend money. Shareware was the right idea, it just happened too early."

When you look to the free-to-play market, there are a few big names that stand head and shoulders above the rest. Riot Games and its collection of MOBAs has identified a strong niche in eSports, and King.com owns the casual, mobile-based market. Wargaming.net straddles that curious middle ground; its audience combining both casual and hardcore players, alongside non-typical gamers – people who play *World Of Tanks* for its historical facets, its loyalty to the intricacies of WWII tech.

Free-to-play is an oft-maligned phrase, carrying heavy connotations with pay-to-win, paywalls and cynical business practices. But what King, Wargaming.net and Riot have in common is that they're not just publishers – they're all also developers, with direct access to, and creative control over, their own products. As such, Wargaming.net is able to respond quickly and effectively to player demands or complaints – something perhaps not afforded by the top-heavy structures in place in larger publishers.

TANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



Most people know Wargaming.net for its work on the *World Of...* trilogy – but the company has existed since 1998, and has been responsible for far more games than most people are aware of. We've compiled a short history of Wargaming.net's releases, which charts the company's transition from turn-based strategy into the MMO...

YEAR	GAME	GENRE
2000	DBA Online	Turn-based strategy
2003	Massive Assault	Turn-based strategy
2005	Massive Assault: Domination	Turn-based strategy
2007	Galactic Assault: Prisoner Of Power	Turn-based strategy
2009	Order Of War	Real-time strategy
2010	Order Of War: Challenge	Real-time strategy
2011	World Of Tanks	MMO
2013	World Of Warplanes	MMO
2014	World Of Tanks (Xbox360)	MMO

THIS CONTROL OVER ITS OWN PRODUCT ALLOWED WARGAMING.NET TO ROLL WORLD OF TANKS OUT IN A VERY SPECIFIC AND PERSONAL WAY; launching originally in Russia (where the company's trail-blazing pricing structure found its feet), Wargaming.net understood that its product would appeal to an audience whose culture and heritage was shaped by tank battles unfolding on the Eastern Front. Wargaming.net's attentive eye to its audience grew, and through word-of-mouth and adept marketing, *World Of Tanks* quickly monopolized the online war games community; there was no other contender – at least not operating on the same scale.

As the audience of *World Of Tanks* grew, so too did the server sizes, as more players came to the fray, more tanks were added to cater for specific tastes. New maps were introduced at regular intervals; Wargaming.net never rested on its laurels, never took its paying customers for granted – when accusations were made that *World Of Tanks* operated on a pay-to-win system, the company redoubled its efforts on making the game as equal for premium and non-premium players as possible. It's focus on maintaining that intimate community that lead to its success has proved, time and again, to be a genuine path towards creating a monetisation system that benefits both player and developer.

The feedback loop Menou mentioned is vital to Wargaming.net's success – the typical publishing cycle for boxed releases practically finishes at the game's launch. With *World Of Tanks*, it's different – the game originally released back in 2011, and since then Wargaming.net has had to keep it relevant, striking a difficult balance between keeping veteran players on-side, and wanting to attract new players. The most recent Xbox 360 patch, for example, features destructible assets on tanks; extra details that you'd expect in 2014, but that long-term players see as a cosmetic bonus. "If you give players content and it doesn't evolve, they're going to take what you give them and then leave. The deal we have





with our players is that some of them give us money, and we keep on developing for the game. Whether that's upgrading the graphical engines – we want *World Of Tanks* to look like a 2014 game, after all – or introducing new features... as long as we're getting money from players, we're going to keep developing. That way, the players stay and they play with us – that's the informal agreement we have with our community. *World Of Tanks*," he reinforces, "would not be the game it is today without the players."

But *World Of Tanks* isn't Wargaming.net's only product – there are other projects in various states of development. *World Of Tanks* was originally conceived as part of a trilogy of games – meant to replicate historical battlefields that have taken place on land (*World Of Tanks*), air (*World Of Warplanes*) and sea (*World Of Warships*). One central office wouldn't have the capacity to produce all these games, so Wargaming.net has expanded its internal communities, as well as its external ones.

> **"WARGAMING.NET'S REMIT SEEMS TO REST HEAVILY ON CELEBRATING THE INGENUITY OF ENGINEERING"**

LOOKING AROUND THE NEW PARISIAN OFFICES SHOWED US THAT WARGAMING.NET EUROPE HAS A SINGULAR PHILOSOPHY – THAT EVERYTHING REALLY DOES REVOLVE AROUND COMMUNITY.

"We're an international company, we have people from all over the world – both Russian and Ukrainian employees," explains Menou. However, the most notable studio at the moment is Ukraine, in Kiev – a studio creating games about war while itself being in the middle of a conflict zone. As the main studio that's developing the *World Of Warplanes* game, we wondered whether that would inform the game design at all, or make the company question its approach to how it portrays violence?

"*World Of Planes*, or *World Of Tanks*, aren't games *about* war," Menou states, "they're games about the machinery. The developers are just crazy about all the technical and mechanical aspects of the game. If you'll notice – in the game, when your tank is destroyed, the crew never die. There's no blood, no death. It's all about the machinery. It is a little awkward that our Ukrainian offices are where they are, but modern warfare doesn't really have anything to do with war at that time."

There's a clear distance created between real, destructive combat, and the celebration of tech and engineering. Wargaming.net reinforces this with a number of projects that aren't perhaps what you would associate with a company creating games of this kind; funding a myriad of different educational schemes, from the reconstructions of lost war technology to the building of teaching rooms at war museums. Wargaming.net's remit – in both gaming and external ventures – seems to rest heavily on celebrating the ingenuity of engineering (something that makes sense when you consider Victor Kislyi's background in tabletop gaming).

The driving force behind the Wargaming.net machine is its business model – the company has found success in embracing a pricing structure that has galvanized every product it releases. Abiding to the shareware mentality – that players want to try before they (possibly) buy – has kept Wargaming.net popular with gamers that want to change the way they spend money in gaming. The last few years will surely be only a footnote in what's likely to become the company's legacy; free-to-play gaming has been shaped by Wargaming.net's efforts as the developer has taken risks other companies haven't. And while it has certainly reaped the rewards – like the boom and bust of subscription-based gaming – does Menou feel that there's a time limit on the current success of the F2P model?

"The curse of successful companies is that – once they've developed that successful game – they want to lock it in a room. But if you do that, then you slowly decay, and it's over." Menou explains. "What we're trying to keep is the spirit that brought us to where we are. We believe that if we have happy employees that care about what they do, and they have management that cares about what they do, everyone will produce better work. The hardest part is not to *have* this culture, the hardest part is keeping it."

THE BEAUTIFUL ESPORT



"Two years ago, we had a meeting with members of the community, many of which were viewers and players of eSports", explains Wargaming.net's director of eSports North American and Europe, Mohamed Fadl. "They said 'Your whole game's about competitive PvP – why don't you go all the way?' There was demand there, so we did." Wargaming.net's support of the eSports community is driven by the demands of its audience. "We're far from having a product that could function as a serious eSport," Fadl admits. "We're very honest with ourselves – we have something we could run right now, but we wouldn't be satisfied with it. So we're watching other eSports games very closely, talking to the professional eSports teams, to figure out exactly what we can do to make *World Of Tanks* a professional and serious eSports game."



20 CONTROVERSIES THAT ROCKED THE INDUSTRY

FOR SUCH A RELATIVELY YOUNG MEDIUM THE GAMES INDUSTRY HAS BEEN SHAKEN BY A LONG LINE OF CONTROVERSIES THAT HAVE – IN SOME FORM OR ANOTHER – SHAPED THE WAY OUR GAMES ARE PRODUCED, PLAYED AND EVEN PUBLICISED. WE DELVE INTO THE FORGOTTEN CONTROVERSIES, BOTH NEW AND OLD, THAT CHANGED OUR INDUSTRY FOREVER

THE PSN OUTAGE



■ SONY HAS HAD a fight on its hands over the last few years and though the PlayStation company is currently considered a gamer's best friend, there was a time where its entire gaming brand was a risk. Many have forgotten the PSN outage of April 2011, where – courtesy of an attack on Sony's services database – PlayStation Network and Qriocity (now Music Unlimited) were brought offline for 24 days. It was the biggest news to have hit any of the big three console manufacturer's for a very long time, leaving 77 million accounts and all their sensitive data open to those that had managed to hack Sony's servers. Combined with a lack of details from Sony and the inability to play PS3 games online, the PSN outage shook Sony to its core – and left many gamers, even now, unwilling to trust Sony's services with credit card details and personal information. Under similar circumstances it could've spelt doom for the company, but somehow Sony recovered.

IT LEFT MANY UNWILLING TO TRUST SONY WITH CREDIT CARD DETAILS AND PERSONAL INFO

But how? Analyst Patrick Walker, from EEDAR, suggests it was the humility that Sony expressed in the days after the outage that truly struck a chord with its consumers: "In the aftermath of the PSN hack," says Walker, "Sony's contrite messaging, quick technology investment and compensation program showed consumers that the company took the issue seriously and began the process of rebuilding consumer trust." Walker adds that a direct apology during E3 of the same year and a humbling public statement from Sony executives in Japan softened the anger many felt towards the PlayStation. It was important to win over those scorned since Sony needed to, as Walker puts it, "recover the rest of their current customers and the broader gaming community before the beginning of the eighth generation."

It worked, too. "Sony's success in rebuilding the trust of their consumers after the PSN hack seems to have informed their current consumer-focused PR and marketing strategy," claims Walker, "in which Sony closely monitors and quickly responds to consumer sentiment and policy response." With the PS4 we've seen Sony reacting quicker than ever, whether it's the determined response to concerns over DRM on the PS4 and even simpler things that could, potentially, breed antagonism towards Sony once again. Walker highlighted the recent example in Sony's change in policy regarding *Driveclub*, whereby players who upgraded their PS Plus copy of the PS4 racer would still need to stay subscribed to PS Plus if they wanted to continue to play it. A controversy began to brew, but Sony – under 24 hours later – retracted the policy, proving how keen it was to keep its customers happy. It's arguable that, without the PR disaster that was the PSN outage, Sony would never have acted quite so meekly as it does now.



■ **Jack Tretton managed to handle – as he called it – the "white elephant" in the room with a great deal of genuine humility.**



■ **Perhaps one of the more humbling images for the games industry, Kaz Hirai and fellow Sony executives bowed in front of gathered press by way of apologising for the PSN outage. Such a public apology is not uncommon in corporate Japan, but it highlighted the sincerity of the situation for Sony.**

CUSTER'S REVENGE

■ THOUGH THE graphics of *Custer's Revenge* were crude its intentions were clear when it rewarded its player upon completion of the game with sex with a naked – and presumably captive – Native American woman.

MORTAL KOMBAT

■ AS ADVANCEMENTS in visual fidelity continued, games like *Mortal Kombat* invariably garnered controversy with their over-the-top displays of violence, gore and gratuitous dismemberment in the form of Fatalities.

NIGHT TRAP

■ THE FMV-DRIVEN *Night Trap* fell foul to complaints suggesting it was violent/predatory as it tasked players with trapping and killing women. The objective was actually contrary to this, requiring you to save women from harm, a separate issue of its own.



TOMB RAIDER (1996)

■ COURTESY OF the pervasive rumour of a 'Nude Lara' cheat code, some enterprising modders created a Nude Raider patch that would allow players to download and install into the PC version of the original game to allow you to play as a naked Lara.

THE SIMS 2

■ DUE TO a console code that allowed for the removal of the censoring blur when a Sim is naked, attorney Jack Thompson insisted the game promoted nudity. Of course this wasn't true, but EA executive Jeff Brown responded to the criticism – ascribing a Sim's nudity to that of Barbie and Ken dolls.



It's ridiculous to think now that switching red blood for green would be enough, but back then visuals of games were mostly about imagination.





Carmageddon

IN HINDSIGHT IT might be incredulous to think of such a crude game like *Carmageddon* to be controversial, but it was the first to garner real interest due to the negative publicity that surrounded it. There had been media outrages before – the violence depicted in *Mortal Kombat* being one of the more memorable – but none had, prior to *Carmageddon*, failed to receive a rating from the BBFC. Publisher Sales Curve Interactive – better known at the time as SCI – had set out to stir up a bit of controversy with the release of *Carmageddon* by submitting the game to the BBFC, even though the game contained no video footage and, therefore, did not require certification at the time. Ironically the BBFC took offence to *Carmageddon*'s over-the-top violence, refusing it certification – essentially banning it from sale in the UK – until the blood and gore was removed, with the BBFC's key issue being the gratuitous dismemberment of innocent civilians. It wasn't until ten months later when Stainless Games swapped the human sprites for zombies with green blood that *Carmageddon* was finally released for sale. It was a galvanising moment for the BBFC, however, who – back in the early Nineties – hadn't particularly considered much of a threat from the simplistic visuals of videogames; since then a concerted effort between a large number of acronym-based classification boards – the BBFC, PEGI, VSC and ELSPA – have all stuck their thumbs in to ensure no videogame too troublesome could get out into the wild.



Thanks to the controversy *Carmageddon* caused, it's easy to forget that the game wasn't actually all that good.

'No Russian' in Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

CONTROVERSY SEEMS TO come easy to *Call Of Duty* these days, but the one to propagate the trend was *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*'s infamous 'No Russian' mission, whereby players were forced into the boots of a terrorist at an airport with an explicit order to gun down civilians in cold blood. It riled a lot of players at the time but it seemed it was the media that spread the controversy – was this something that deserved the outcry? "I actually had a problem with No Russian," says Wedbush analyst Michael Pachter, "as I tried to get through it without killing anyone, and was killed by my fellow bad guys instead. Gamers weren't offended because they realised it was part of the setup for the game, which I thought had a much worse ending." Now it seems Activision is looking for ways to court such widespread controversy these days, at least with regards to *Call Of Duty*. In many cases it's a particular scene included primarily to shock, while in others it's a more concerted effort to tie the *Call Of Duty* campaign into a recent trend. Even *Advanced Warfare* takes recent fears of personal security and freedom – formed in large part to Edward Snowden's leak of NSA documents – and crafts a single-player campaign that latches onto that. Pachter believes that's a smart move for Activision, regardless of controversy "I think that making the game more topical is good for the game's hype, but it is also more "real" for gamers," he says. Controversy has long been a cheap – but effective – way of building interest in any medium, so don't expect this trend to stop with any time soon.



The 'No Russian' mission was entirely optional, perhaps done so in a knowing assumption that the inclusion of forced terrorism would enrage even more gamers.



It is actually possible to complete the mission without shooting anyone, though at the expense of the character's own life.



SONY'S PSP ADVERT

THOUGH SONY has had countless controversial and shocking adverts for the PlayStation (in particular the PS2), its biggest faux pas was alongside the release of the white PSP where a white woman was seen grabbing – and overpowering – a black woman.

MASS EFFECT

FOX NEWS covered *Mass Effect* after it was wrongly accused of depicting "full graphic sex". There *are* romance options within the game, but no explicit or frontal nudity to the sex scenes. Fox News' speaker on the subject later apologised via *The New York Times*.

MEDAL OF HONOR

THE MULTIPLAYER mode for *Medal Of Honor* original had one side of the two teams playing as the Taliban, which developer persisted was 'a necessity'. All the same, the term was changed to 'Opposing Force' by the time it released.



TOMB RAIDER (2013)

CRYSTAL DYNAMICS' reboot received criticism when it was suggested that Lara Croft was to be sexually assaulted by an island inhabitant. Whether changes were made or not is unknown, though the developer insisted it was intended as a catalyst for Lara's growth, raising further questions around the way female characters are portrayed in videogames.

RED RINGS OF DEATH

MICROSOFT EDGED itself ahead of the console competition with the release of the Xbox 360, arriving at retail substantially ahead of its major rivals. However, it was prone to suffer major hardware faults, resulting in the notorious Red Rings of Death. It caused many to question the robustness of Microsoft's platform and spread mistrust despite the company's swift and apposite response.

'RACIST' RESIDENT EVIL

E3 2007 LEFT Capcom feeling a little battered. It revealed a gameplay trailer of *Resident Evil 5*, it had expected excitement from its fans – but what it got was accusations of racism. The video, which had white protagonist Chris Redfield gunning down black African enemies, had obvious connotations of racism. Though the company never responded to the criticism at the time, a second trailer in 2008 revealed a much more racially diverse selection of zombies, as well as introducing African Sheva as a playable character. With the release of the second trailer these concerns drifted away, but it was still a stigma that had latched itself onto *Resident Evil 5*. In an interview with *CVG*, producer Masachika Kawata answered the criticism by claiming the African setting was purely "to go back to the root of where the virus originated". On the claims of racism, he added that "we can't please everyone. We're in the entertainment business - we're not here to state our political opinion or anything like that. It's unfortunate that some people felt that way." Michael Pachter believes its effects will have hit the industry as a whole: "It was pretty racially insensitive at the time, and I think most developers took note."



Despite intentions, it was still an oversight on Capcom's part not to consider the implications of the trailer.



Even post-release *Resident Evil 5* suffered from criticism, from an overuse of stereotypes to Sheva's lighter-coloured skin to differentiate her from darker skins of the zombies you battled.

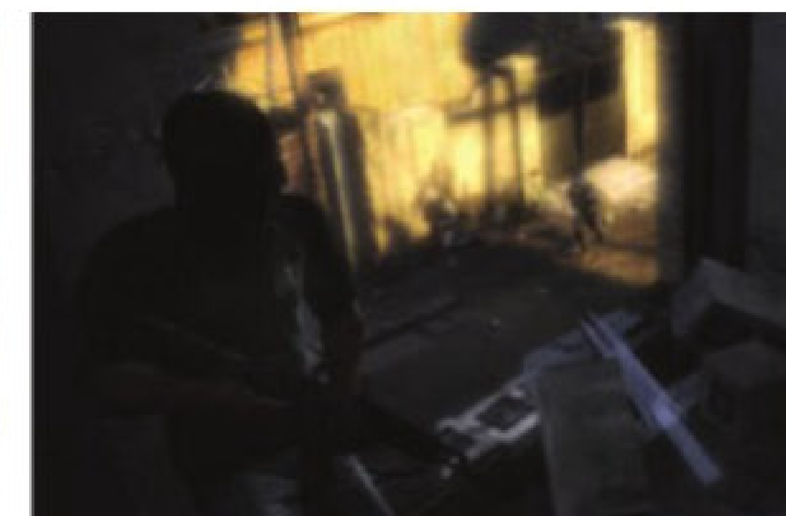
Six Days In Fallujah

VIDEOGAMES DON'T EXACTLY shy away from covering wars, even modern day ones – but rare are the instances where a videogame looks to capitalise on an ongoing war, especially one that so many were against in the first place. *Six Days In Fallujah* was never released, its controversy seemingly too great for publisher Konami to risk. The premise was simple enough, developer Atomic Games had spoken to a large number of soldiers, civilians and war historians about the real-life second battle of Fallujah during the Iraq War – its aim was to replicate the trails US Marines would have encountered during the conflict. Almost immediately after it was announced, *Six Days In Fallujah* suffered heavy criticism from the wider media, with many associated with the real-life conflict speaking out against the game. Though the idea was the take a serious look at the life of a soldier in such a situation, most saw the game as glorifying the Iraq War and the uncontainable negativity surrounding *Six Days In Fallujah* meant that Konami had to pull the plug on publishing the title (which, apparently, is still in development). Though games like *Call Of Duty* and *Medal Of Honor* dealt with modern wars, they skirted around dispute by inventing their own depictions within them. *Six Days In Fallujah*'s controversial decision caused offence to many affected by the war, highlighting that videogames just don't have the maturity to tend to such recent – and sensitive – wounds.

KONAMI HAD TO PULL THE PLUG ON THE TITLE



Rare are the times when a game is greeted with instant negativity upon its announcement; even rarer are the times when such a game successfully survives such an outcry of disapproval.





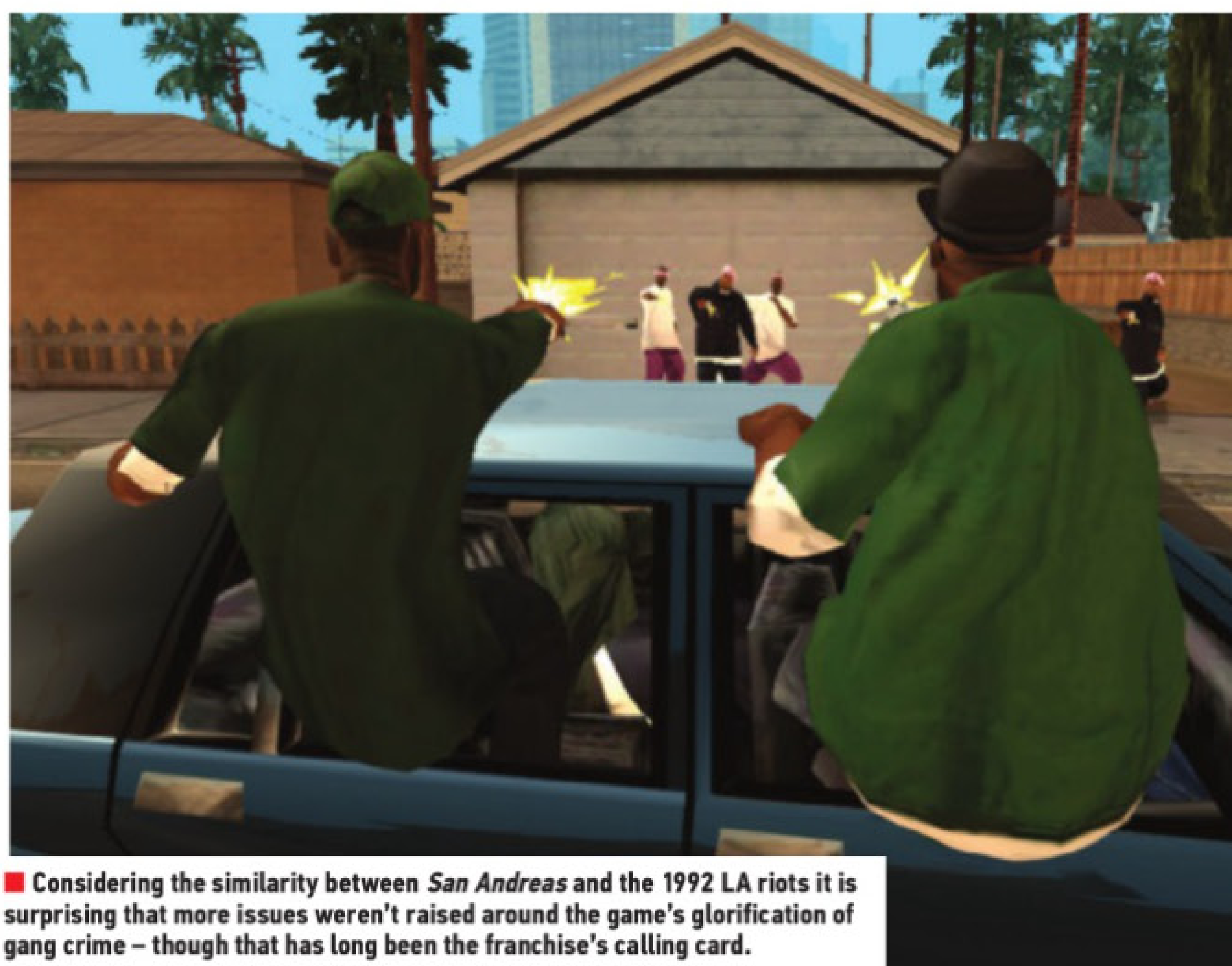
Despite the negativity, there were some who felt *Six Days In Fallujah* could help to add credibility to videogames if handled sensitively.

Hot Coffee

■ THE SERIES IS well-known to court complaints from a wider media, but with Hot Coffee, Rockstar found itself shamed in a way it was not expecting. By uncovering hidden code and assets within the game, modder Patrick Wildenborg discovered a mini-game buried within the PC version of San Andreas that riffed on the dancing mini-game already accessible – the only difference was that this mini-game revolved around explicit sex with player character CJ and his girlfriends. Once uncovered the mod was released, and enabled players to take part in these sex scenes, which replaced CJ's otherwise suggestive post-date invites for coffee for a more overt interpretation.

It didn't take long for the media to discover the situation, and even less time for outraged politicians and lawyers to get involved. Hilary Clinton was the most notable, who insisted new regulations be placed on games and resulted in the ESRB changing the game's rating from Mature to 18 only. Rockstar claimed that the mod created a considerable amount of assets, but the truth was different – as highlighted when hackers managed to get the same feature running on the PS2, proving the content was there.

But was this controversy for nothing? The mini-game could only be accessed by tampering with the game's scripts; was it a case of Rockstar being an easy target of controversy? "The content was there, and it didn't have to be," says Michael Pachter, claiming that more needed to be done by Rockstar to cover the embarrassing content up. "They could have deleted the code instead of hiding it, and the fact that it was there was the problem." But with all said and done, Pachter doesn't believe Rockstar has changed its development process. Rockstar is often a victim of such complaints, whether rightly or wrongly, with the violence of its games a particularly popular topic. "Save for the ban on explicit sexual content," adds Pachter, "everything else is fair game. The "media" likes to beat up on the games industry as causing violence… It's an idiotic connection, but the press loves to make it."



■ Considering the similarity between *San Andreas* and the 1992 LA riots it is surprising that more issues weren't raised around the game's glorification of gang crime – though that has long been the franchise's calling card.



■ *Grand Theft Auto* is no stranger to controversy. Each iteration is met with renewed contrition from the media.

Xbox One Eighty

■ PERHAPS THE MOST recent controversy of modern times, Microsoft's stoic approach to the Xbox One has left it humbled. Insisting the future of videogames was a digital-only, Kinect-fuelled, TV-emphatic experience, Microsoft's Xbox One was almost shunned when the watching world refused to accept the anti-consumerist future. It seems inevitable that change would happen now, but at the time it was insisted that Microsoft was not going to change its plans. And this was the real problem of Microsoft's now infamous 'Xbox 180'; the company's stubbornness only sought to make it look a little bit silly when it announced the changes that would have to be made to the Xbox One. But was it fear that forced Microsoft's hand or genuine consideration of the consumer's desires? "The Xbox 180 was a direct response to the outrage at the time," says Pachter, "and I don't think pre-orders had much to do with it at all. I think that the Xbox One is hard-wired to work with Kinect. As far as hard-wired for DRM, everyone understood that to be a software fix, and that is ultimately what it was. I don't think it had a lasting impact on Microsoft at all." And considering the sales of the Xbox One – which aren't quite as high as Sony's with the PS4, but are impressive all the same – this is clearly true. By retracting on many of its policies, gamers have since returned to the Xbox. Now Microsoft has removed the last two barriers to entry with the Xbox One – the mandatory Kinect and the price difference with the PS4 – there could be more in this generation's console war than we might expect. Microsoft will remember its false start, however: "Xbox One sales would likely have been 50% lower if they had kept the DRM policies in place, and probably would have been 25% higher without Kinect (at a more competitive price)." Hopefully that will be the last of the controversies for Microsoft this generation, but whether or not this difficult start will have a lasting effect won't be clear for years.



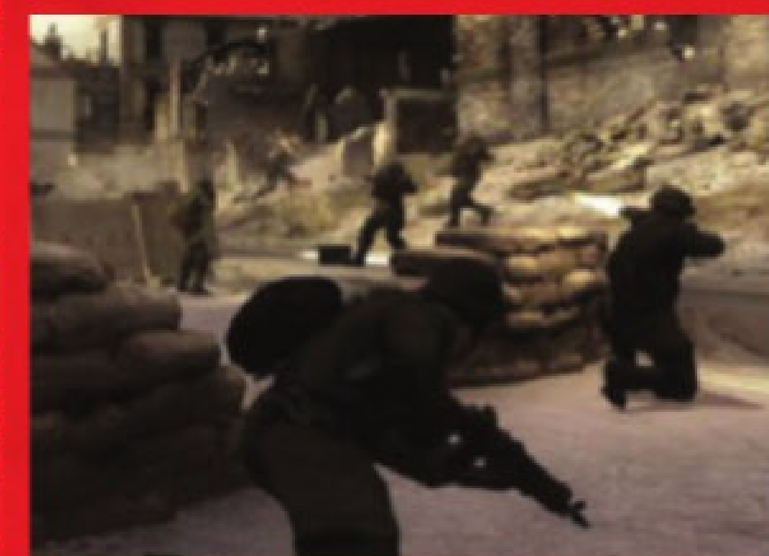


■ Many Microsoft figureheads have since left, whether it's Adam Orth (of '#DealWithIt' fame) or Don Mattrick (pictured) who left for Zynga. Both suffered heavy criticism from gamers.



THE PUNISHER

■ Gruesome and brutal torture scenes in *The Punisher* put it at the forefront of controversy at the time, and is currently one of a handful of games that the BBFC enforced edits on before it was allowed to be released.



RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

■ Religion will always be a sticking point for any entertainment medium, so when PS3 launch title *Resistance* had you shooting your way through Manchester Cathedral it was hardly a surprise when the Church of England objected, describing it as "desecration".

HITMAN MISFIRES

■ By its nature, *Hitman* will always be a franchise that courts controversy by the graphic content of its theme alone, but the surprising truth is that IO Interactive's franchise has stolen headlines for all the wrong reasons. It rubbed a whole religion up the wrong way when in *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* Agent 47 was tasked with taking down a terrorist in the holy Harmandir Sahib temple. Sikhs deemed the whole level as "disgraceful" and Eidos responded with a swift apology and edited the then unreleased GameCube version.

It wasn't the only instance of the franchise being criticised for insensitivity. During the marketing blitzkrieg for *Hitman: Absolution*, one particularly gaudy trailer depicted a group of gun-toting latex-clad nuns being slaughtered by 47. Following a similar allegation of sexism made against Tomb Raider earlier in the year, Square Enix had to seriously rethink its advertising strategies going forward.

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Reviews

102 WATCH DOGS

Does Ubisoft's long-awaited open-world epic raise the bar on next-gen?





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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HACK ONCE AGAIN WITH THE RENEGADE MASTER

Watch Dogs

Five years. A lot changes in five years. Gaming's a technological arms race and in half a decade a game that looks revolutionary at the start can seem decrepit by the end. This is the challenge Ubisoft Montreal's colossal *Watch Dogs* team has faced since its ballsy, thrilling E3 reveal in 2012 – can the reality of its open world ever match those lofty ambitions? The answers, quite typically, are yes and no.

To get it out of the way, no, *Watch Dogs* does not look as gorgeous as it did back in 2012. The extra lighting passes, the extraordinary detail… they're not all here. That said, the PS4 version is still a very handsome fellow indeed, especially at night. Trudging through the Chicago streets as rain pelts down, wind blows litter down the road and the neon throb shimmers in the puddles… it's still quite something. And most importantly of all, it moves smoothly at all times on PS4.

But concentrating on the way the game looks is, as always, missing the point. Instead, it's far more interesting to look at the ways *Watch Dogs* adds to the open world genre, and also how it borrows from elsewhere. This is a game that has strong ideas and excellent execution, but is still very much an 'open world videogame'. That to many will be a disappointment, but by concentrating on nailing the fundamentals, *Watch Dogs* earns the right to experiment in a few interesting ways.

You play, as you'll probably already know, as hacker extraordinaire Aiden Pearce. He's a menace on the streets of Chicago, a city now electronically controlled by a digital overseer called CtOS. This controls everything from the traffic to the police, and has the technology to data mine every single citizen in the city. Thanks to Aiden's skills and his magical smartphone, though, he also has access to that information, and can strut around examining the private lives of everyone he walks past simple by looking at them. This is initially a superficial feature, giving the city some life and odd believability, along with a few side missions here and there (listen in on a phone call, stop a crime). As the game expands and the lengthy campaign deepens, though, these systems begin to underpin everything that *Watch Dogs* does outside of the typical action game settings.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DARK PLACE *Watch Dogs'* story and atmosphere is dark and wracked with paranoia and ugliness.
LIZ BIZ The relationship with Elizabeth is cemented by her wonderful facial expressions and performance.

A basic example: many missions involve the infiltration of a secured area, either to locate key personnel, or hack a hidden server. A fairly typical mission scenario, but one that allows the game's systems to come to the fore. Aiden can hack many things in the world, from car alarms to gas pipes to exploding electrical grids to the comms sets in guards ears. To do this, he needs line of sight. Crucially, though, this line of sight can also come from a camera feed.

It's entirely possible to complete large numbers of *Watch Dogs'* campaign missions, as well as specific side tasks, using only cameras. March Aiden to the outskirts of

TRUDGING THROUGH THE CHICAGO STREETS AS RAIN PELTS DOWN, WIND BLOWS LITTER DOWN THE ROAD AND THE NEON THROB SHIMMERS IN THE PUDDLES

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: *Watch Dogs* is bustling with side content. There are gang hideouts to infiltrate, 'fixer' contracts to take up (Assassinations, basically), all manner of crimes to stop in the streets, and even a FourSquare-style check-in app to complete.



Above: It may not look as gorgeous as it did back in 2012, but that was always a target video. *Watch Dogs* is still a very good looking game, and it moves smoothly and solidly on PS4.

Left: Aiden can climb and vault, but weirdly cannot jump. Perhaps jumping isn't cool in hacker circles.



Space Invaders

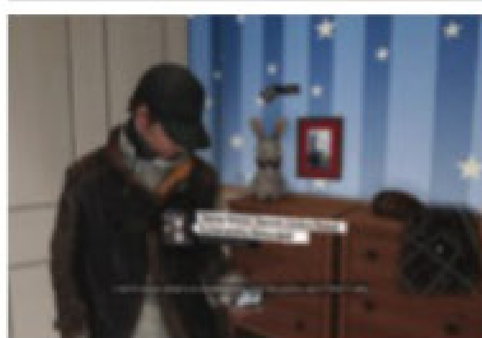
Throughout the single-player campaign, other players can physically invade your world and attempt to hack you for 'information'. In actuality, they're looking to steal some of your notoriety, a currency that powers one of *Watch Dogs'* multiple unlock trees. You'll be told when you're invaded, and have to locate and profile (using your phone) your guest before they can get their hacking bar up to 100%. What follows is an elaborate and – more importantly – fun game of hide and seek.

Inset: Online hacking is more of an aside than a game mode to lose yourself in, but it's impressive nonetheless. Eight-player matches are enjoyable if a little manic.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

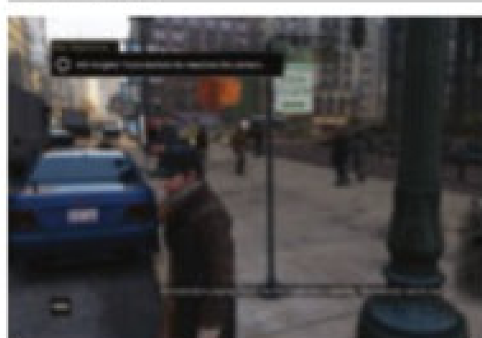
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



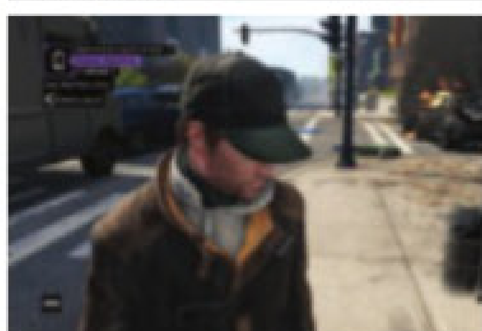
A lengthy opening cutscene leads into some slow tutorial missions. It's not what we'd call a particularly impressive way to start one of the most hyped games of next-gen.

2 HOURS



Chicago opens up, and so do the possibilities you have within it. With side missions, random crimes and online modes to dabble in, it's easy to be distracted from the campaign.

30 HOURS



Chances are you'll have finished the campaign and torn through a lot of the side content. While it doesn't match the scale of *GTA V*'s Los Santos, there are always plenty of things to do in Chicago.



an area, and hack the first camera you see. From there, you can scoot around to different cameras, effectively moving through the environment without actually being there. You may need to find a guard with a helmet cam to be able to get into a smaller area, or distract someone using an environmental hack, but there's almost always a way of completing missions passively, and that's hugely impressive for a game of this scope.

Of course, it becomes a little tiring to play an entire game by moving around video feeds, which is why it's so important that *Watch Dogs*' fundamentals are sound. Just as you can hack a mission into submission, you can also blow it to pieces with an AK and play the whole thing like a shooter. Brilliantly, the game scales for every approach. It encourages stealth but never demands it. You can use the hacking for a quiet approach or to wreak mayhem. And you're not punished or locked into an upgrade tree for how you choose to play, so there's room for experimentation at every turn.

If you do choose to go in guns blazing, the shooting is universally excellent. Strangely, it's actually reminiscent of ancient PS2 effort *The Getaway*, largely because you're assaulting gang hideouts and militarised compounds with loud, deadly weapons, and constantly feel like you're under threat. It's stronger than *GTA*'s equivalent, and allows the game to throw up some proper action missions without ever feeling like it's letting the player down. Yes, some people might not want another shooter, but after ten hours of looking at camera feeds, it's nice to be able to let rip on some bad guys.

And bad guys they are. Aiden himself is hardly an archetypal goodie – his thirst for revenge after a gang killed his niece comes before anyone else. What you get is

Sound Hack

A special mention must go to *Watch Dogs*' original score. Like *GTA V*, the game lets you listen to licensed tracks when driving around outside of missions. When it specific story beats to hit, though, it does so with a pulsating, grimy combination of industrial grind and electro synth-heavy breaks. It perfectly suits the mood of this heavy-going narrative, lending every chase, intense hacking scene or cautious break-in a sense of necessity and brooding nastiness. In recent years, games have stepped away from the orchestral pomp that has been a mainstay in the movies for the past decade, and it's all the better for that.

Above: Vehicle handling is a little shaky and loose, but car chases are universally excellent. Aiden can hack traffic lights, under-road steam pipes and car-shattering bollards as he tries to escape both the law and his enemies.



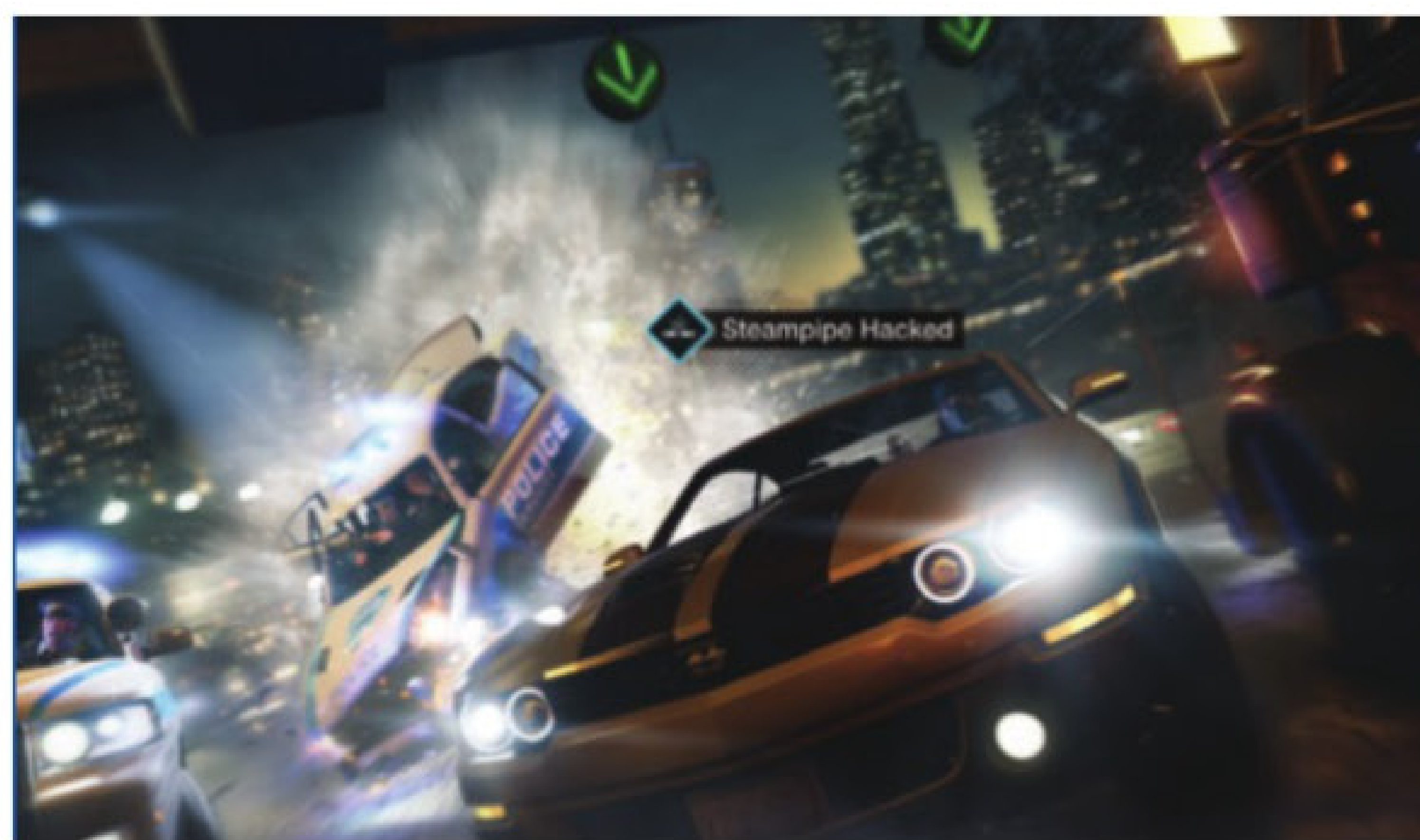






Left: The narrative takes some very dark turns. This is a game that earns its age rating, and those who are easily offended would be best served to avoid *Watch Dogs* altogether.

Right: Ubisoft's open-world template is here for all to see, but *Watch Dogs* has enough going on in its version of Chicago that it doesn't just feel like a lengthy checklist of past glories.



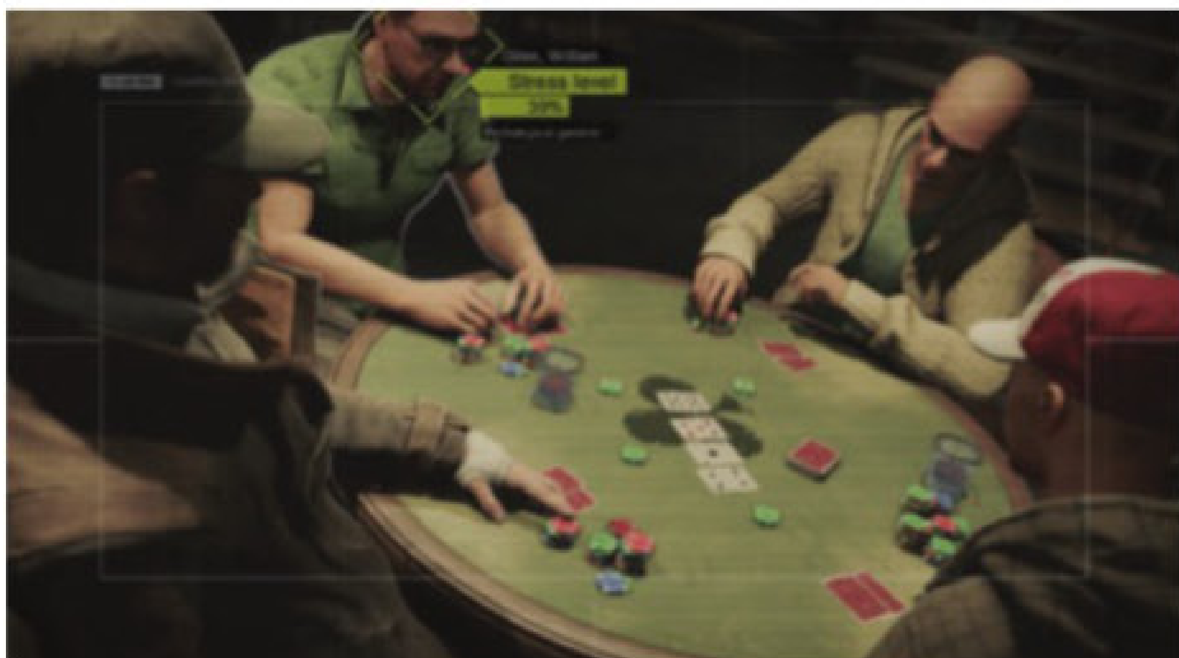


Above: Shooting is sharp and exciting. Some missions have truly epic gun battles across huge environments.

a character whose motivations are muddy at best, yet those he battles are arguably considerably worse. *Watch Dogs* delves down some dark alleys as you progress in the campaign, and remains compelling to the end. The story meanders at times and occasionally confuses, but the central arc and the key characters do their jobs well. This isn't a light-hearted affair, and at times it can become overly serious, but not all games have to poke fun at themselves to get their points across. *Watch Dogs* is at its best when it's at its darkest.

Frustratingly, it can't always maintain its excellence. The odd choice to include mini-games, Reddit-style memes and online races are completely counter-productive for the atmosphere the game is striving to establish. It seems odd to baulk at extra content, but it only diminishes the tone. A clumsy line of dialogue here and there is forgivable in a 40-hour game, but having Aiden stop dead in his tracks to have a quick game of pretend alien shooting is bizarre. Also, *Watch Dogs* falls back on some overly familiar tropes. Too often you'll be in an insta-fail stealth mission, or tediously tailing a car. When the game's best missions are so thrilling, it's disappointing to be trudging through the types of levels that have been boring players for a decade.

Above: While you can hack electronic devices lining the streets at any time, the game will also indicate when to hit a particular trap to ensnare a pursuing enemy.



FAQs

Q. HOW BIG IS IT?
Chicago is large and full of distinct areas, while the story alone is easily 20 hours long

Q. AS GOOD AS GTA?
No, it's neither as detailed or as compelling, but the shooting mechanics are stronger and missions excellent.

Q. DOES HE EVER TAKE THE HAT OFF?
Yes, but very, very rarely. He's hiding from the cameras, see…

WATCH DOGS IS A RARE THING: A NEW TRIPLE-A FRANCHISE THAT OFFERS NEW IDEAS AND BACKS IT UP WITH YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

HACK AND SLASH Invade other worlds, find invaders in yours, and feel part of a wider world of interconnected players… or souls. Yeah, it does work a lot like the multiplayer component in *Dark Souls*.

And if you're familiar with Ubisoft's other open worlders, namely *Assassin's Creed* and *FarCry*, you might start to feel publisher fatigue. Unlock areas of the map by climbing towers? Check. Side quests for unlocks? Check. Crafting? Check. Endless side content? Check. *Watch Dogs* follows the Ubisoft template to a T. It's a very strong template, and probably executed better here than in the other major games from that enormous studio, but again those crying out for a genuinely new experience will come away upset. *Watch Dogs* just isn't that game.

What it is, though, is a supremely well-made open world game with some great new ideas and a really intriguing sense of paranoia and technological fear. Maintaining a consistency of tone is almost impossible when dealing with a team of hundreds and hundreds of people, but *Watch Dogs* does an admirable job regardless, especially if you ignore some of its dafter side content. Is it the start of the 'next-gen' many had promised and hoped it would be? That term has become meaningless. *Watch Dogs* is a rare thing: a new triple-A franchise that offers new ideas and backs it up with years of experience in open world design.

2014 will have better games, stronger ideas and more visually impressive spectacles, but none of this stops *Watch Dogs* from being another very fine offering from Ubisoft Montreal, a studio that has a commitment to both quality and narrative that should always be admired.

VERDICT 9/10
SMART AND COMPLETE, BUT STILL FOCUSED ON THE PAST

THE REICH STUFF

Wolfenstein: The New Order

Right: Guns have a nice weight to their design. MachineGames would rather you kept your finger on the trigger, so there's little use for the scope and barely any recoil.

The biggest evil that has faced William "B.J." Blazkowicz over the course of his multiple incarnations hasn't been the onslaught of Nazi soldiers that trundle towards the end of his broiling gun barrel, but the time period in which the square-jawed action hero has been unforgiveably confined to.

Whereas a decade ago dredging through World War II history was the de facto source of inspiration for the first-person shooter, the genre hasn't looked back since advancing to contemporary battlefields and the creeping War On Terror. So, the question is: how do you make shooting Nazis relevant again? Well, you just make it bloody good fun, obviously.

Hence, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* unapologetically old school mentality to both its setting and heritage (avoiding implementing modish mechanics unlike its 2009 predecessor), which dispenses with the po-faced histrionics that have been unduly served to gamers in recent years. In short: it's fun, fun, fun.

Time has been pushed forward slightly to refresh the concept. The war is over with Nazi Germany emerging victorious, leading to small pockets of resistance fighting back to topple to the Third Reich's regime in 1960. This has little consequence on the fundamentals: it's still Blazkowicz pumping holes in waves of enemy soldiers to the cathartic putter-putter of antiquated military firearms – but it adds an engaging twist with pseudo-historical artefacts from the reimagined timeline.

MachineGames has gone to extreme lengths to make its world credible. Here, The Beatles have been forced to sing in German under the name Die Käfer (with their iconic album *Das Blaue U-boot*) and it was the Nazis that conducted the moon landing. As amusing as these incidental details are, in contrast with the narrative it highlights a major flaw. Clearly drawing inspiration from *Inglourious Basterds*, the game relishes in basically everything preposterous about its hypothetical retelling and the basic boys-on-a-mission premise rockets along at a firm pace, but it sorely lacks the crackling dialogue of Tarantino and ultimately fumbles during its dramatic beats.

It was never going to be easy juggling musings on the psychological impact of war one moment and then chucking in a cheesy one-liner about Nazis walking on the moon the next ("f*** you, Moon"), and as admirable as the intentions here are, the result makes for an awkward tonal imbalance.

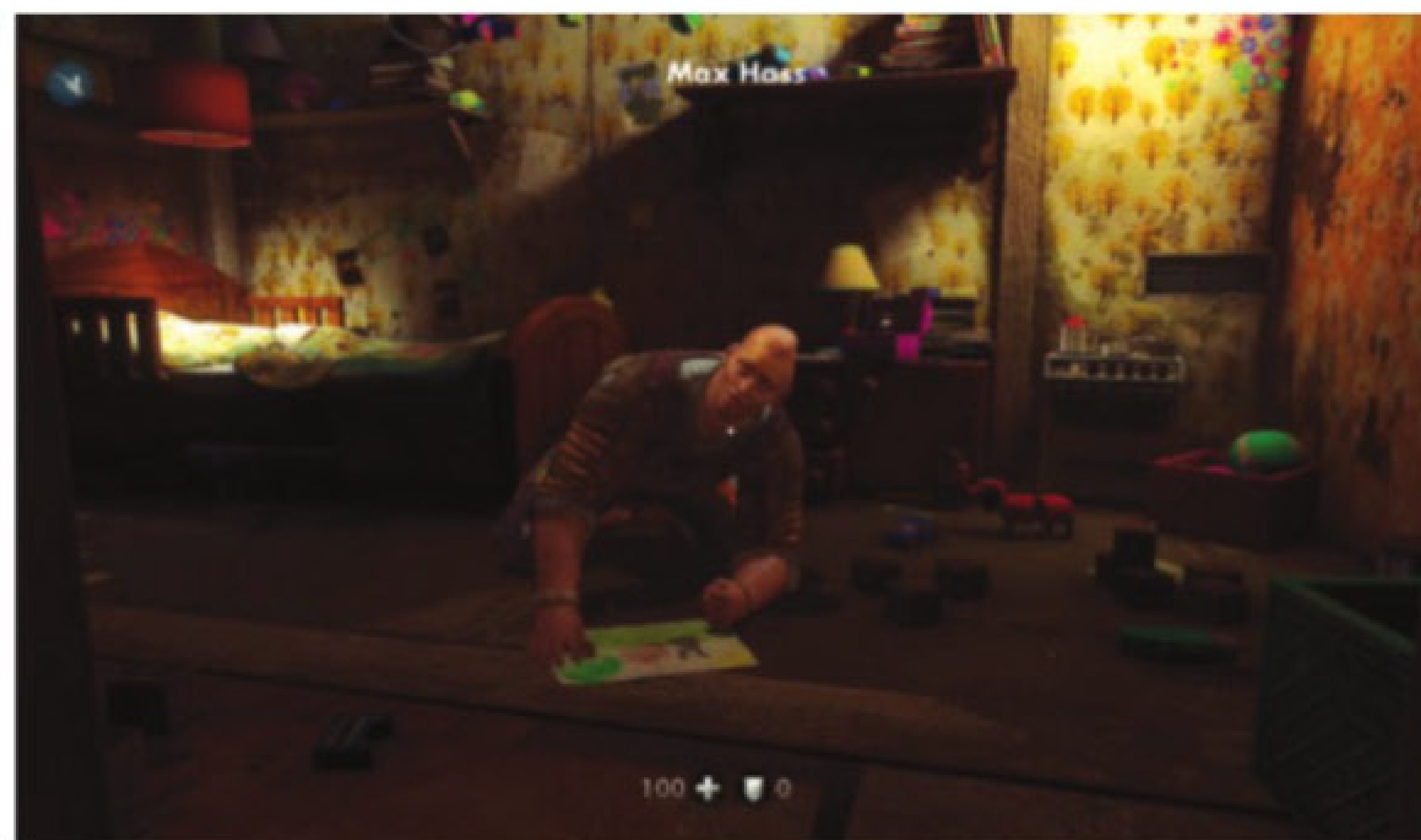
Comprised of ex-Starbreeze Studios devs (*The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness*), it's encouraging that new outfit, MachineGames, has been founded on similar principles. *The New Order* is a gratuitous, gut-filled orgy of chaos and destruction, packed with as much action, spectacle and excitement

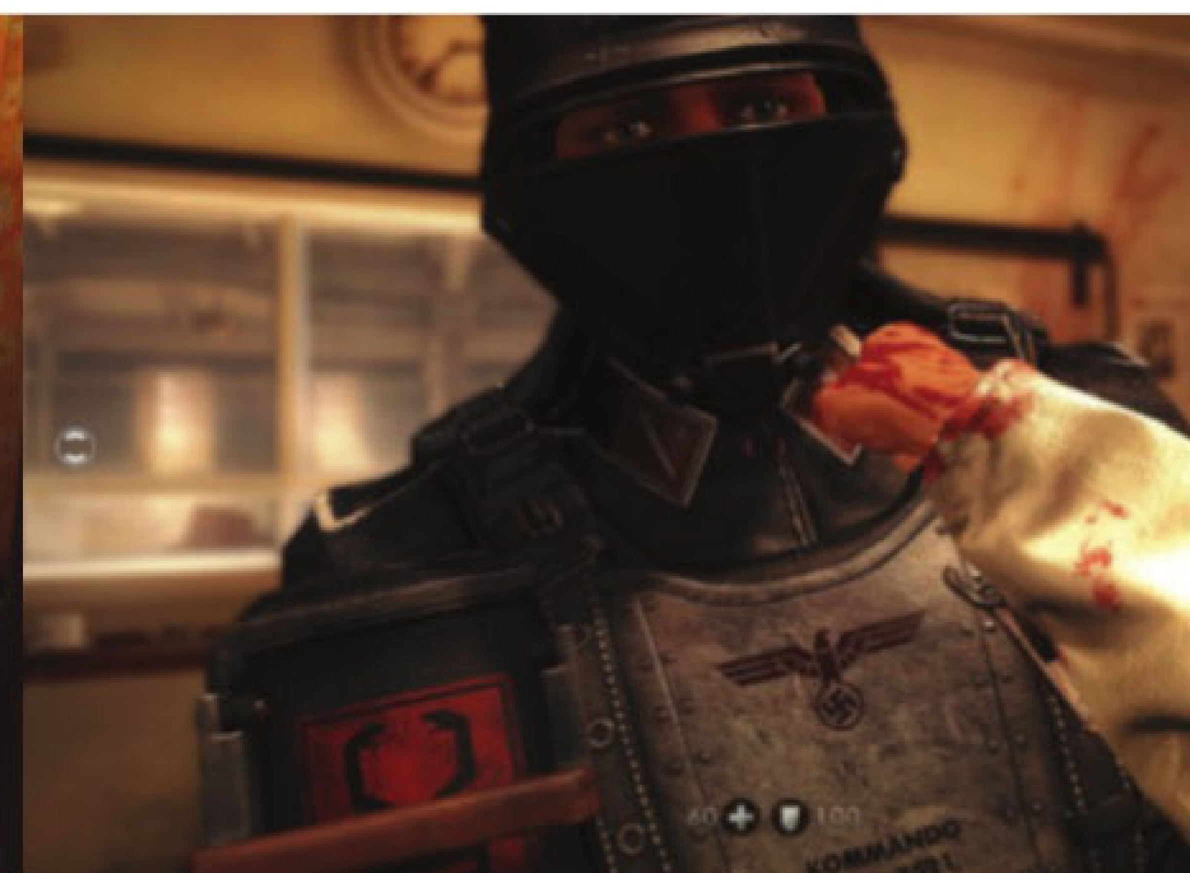
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Pc, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: MachineGames
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: Much of the story is played out over cutscenes. The performances here are quite impressive, even if there's an over abundance of solemnity that is at odds with the general insanity of the central concept.

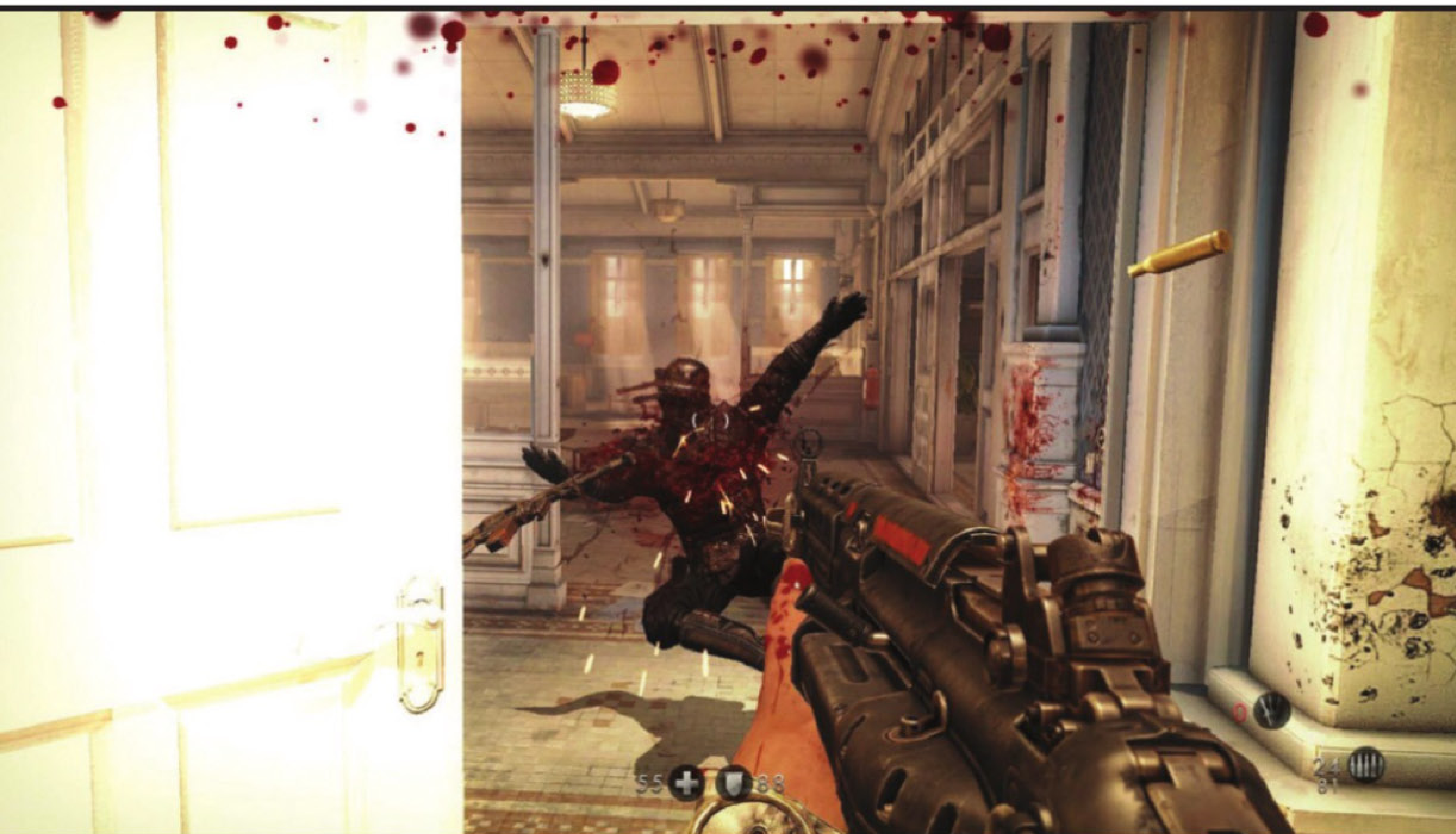






Above: One moment you'll be escaping a prison in an armoured mech, the next you'll be finding toys for a mentally handicapped amigo.

A GRATUITOUS, GUT-FILLED ORGY OF CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION, PACKED WITH AS MUCH ACTION, SPECTACLE AND EXCITEMENT AS THE DISK ALLOWS





FAQs

Q. IS IT SET IN WWII?
It begins in World War II, but most of the game is set in a reminaged Sixties.

Q. IS IT BLOODY?
The game is massively gory, but it's not always appropriate. In one mission Blazkowicz randomly removes a tattoo with a scalpel.

Q. IS IT LIKE COD?
The New Order is what some might call 'old school'. It's about shooting as many targets as spectacularly as possible.



RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

Wolfenstein: The New Order **is littered with sneaky Easter egg hidden throughout its campaign but one of the most ingenious enables players to play some of the series' 22-year-old classic *Wolfenstein 3D*, remade in the game's engine. Crawl up to the highest level of the safe house and you'll find a painting of the classic game, select 'Enter Nightmare' and you'll be transported into the 16-bit game armed with your gun from *The New Order*. It's a surprisingly tough stretch of the game and you can only play through it once each time you visit the safe house in the game. Still, as far as affectionate Easter eggs in gaming go, it's one of the best we've seen in quite some time.**



into its sizeable campaign as the disk allows (or several if you're purchasing the game for a last-gen system). A stalwart in quality franchise adaptations and reboots, the studio appears to be galvanised by the *Wolfenstein* licence and throws just about every idea at the wall to see what sticks.

It's an approach that would explain the game's ill-judged opening. Set back in 1946, the game begins by setting the scene on, of all things, a plane. During this extended sequence *Wolfenstein* labours to engage players with its archetypal characters, presenting a set of objectives that requires little else but executing several mundane button prompts – one of its few concessions to contemporary genre norms. Yet, unlike most triple-A titles of its ilk, this doesn't set the precedent for what follows. Instead, terra firma offers branching narratives, diverse set-pieces and a torrent of inventive enemy types.

However, the greatest triumph is just how polished the mechanics are. MachineGames has built a shooter that respects the series' roots, but more importantly has styled itself in the vein of seminal Nineties PC shooters. You'll find accuracy and recoil aren't an issue and there's almost no reason at all to stare down the scope. Instead, *The New Order* presents a modest crop of hefty firearms that can be dual-wielded and upgraded to tear Nazi soldiers into pieces.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHY SO SERIES?: One of the biggest problems with *The New Order* is its approach to the story. It never embraces how hokey the concept is. We'd just add a little more levity to the proceedings.

The weapons aren't quite so memorable as the impact that they have on enemies. There's the assault rifle that unloads several rounds a second and the laser cutter that eviscerates enemies into a blood cloud – and can also be used to cut through wire and metal to access concealed areas – but everything performs to standard – nothing is particularly inventive.

As you might expect the game doesn't just rely on the arsenal (improbably) strapped to your back, with mechanised killing machines at your disposal and a quick turnaround on set-pieces to ensure that the ingredients don't rest long enough to stagnate. Adding to that is a healthy amount of smarts to the enemy AI. While many environments are tight and claustrophobic like its predecessors, occasionally areas open up and enemies do their best to flank around you.

Wolfenstein: The New Order has a lot of heart, reinventing a classic franchise with enough knowing influence and deft touch to make it feel relevant to a whole new era of gamers. While it's a little rough around the edges both technically and visually – we were expecting a little more out of the PlayStation 4 iteration – the vibrancy is found in its stripped-back style.

VERDICT 7/10
A BIG, DUMB HEAP OF FUN

NOT BANANA REPUBLIC LIKE THE HIGH STREET

Tropico 5

When people think of *Tropico* they assume you have to be a sneaking, conniving and self-serving leader of the public in a banana republic beset by corruption and constantly on the verge of revolution. That's simply not true.

In fact, you are more than capable in this long-running city builder of running a government that is fair and open, that puts the needs of the many before the needs of El Presidente's bank account and that runs yearly impartial elections.

That's the part where we fell down *in the tutorial* of *Tropico 5* – trying to run things how we felt they should be run without knowing the intricacies of the systems. We managed to lose the free and fair election. Game over. In the tutorial, that is.

So it is that you inevitably fall to the lure of corruption – a bit of an electoral tweak here, a $5,000 bribe to the leader of the rebels there, eventually you think nothing of having dissidents dragged out of their homes and executed in the streets as an example to other would-be protesters.

Tropico 5 gives you more chance than ever before to still run things *properly*, but the fact of the matter is that's a really difficult way to do things. Losing an election is game over, so why not just initiate martial law, and therefore cancelling elections for the forseeable future? Yes, the people might not like it much, but so what?

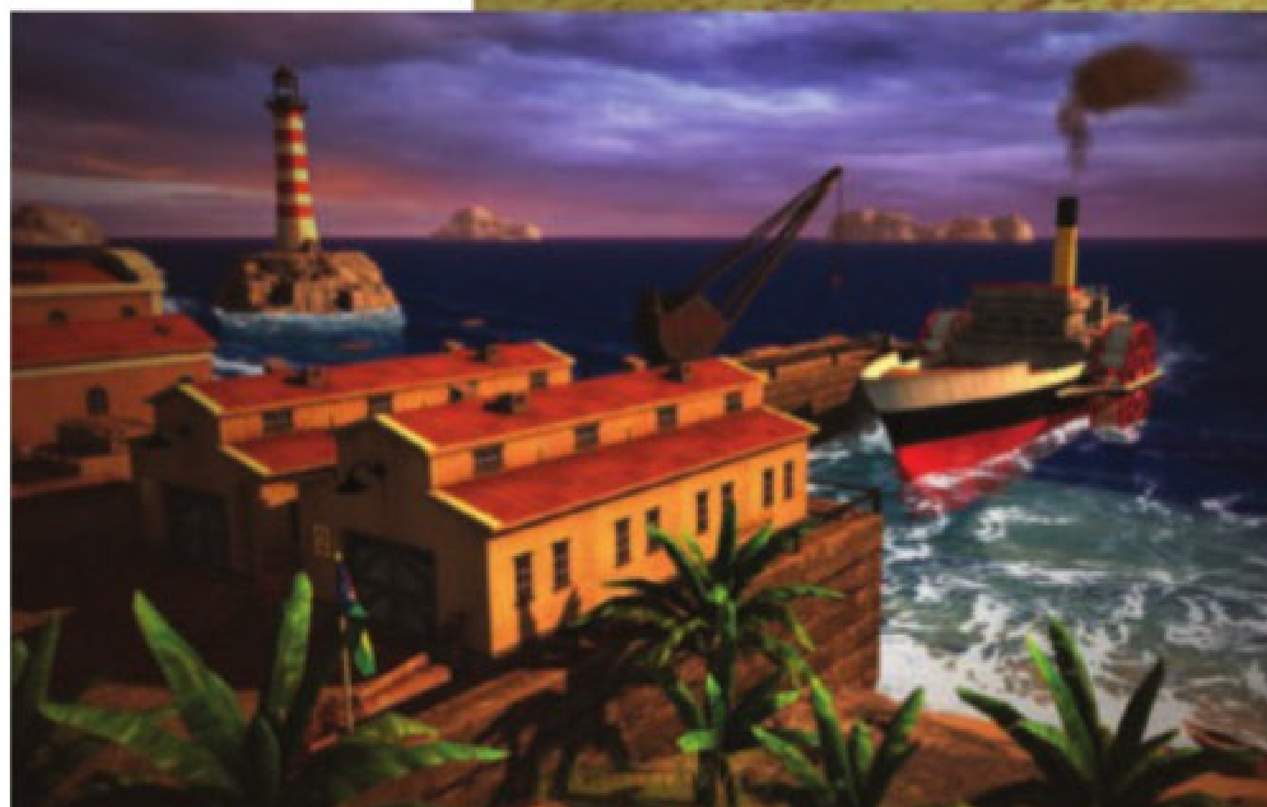
These kinds of concerns have always been at the centre of *Tropico* games and they're just as interesting and exciting as they've ever been – they're also some of the best-developed and deepest elements of a series that has always veered off into banality the more time you put into it.

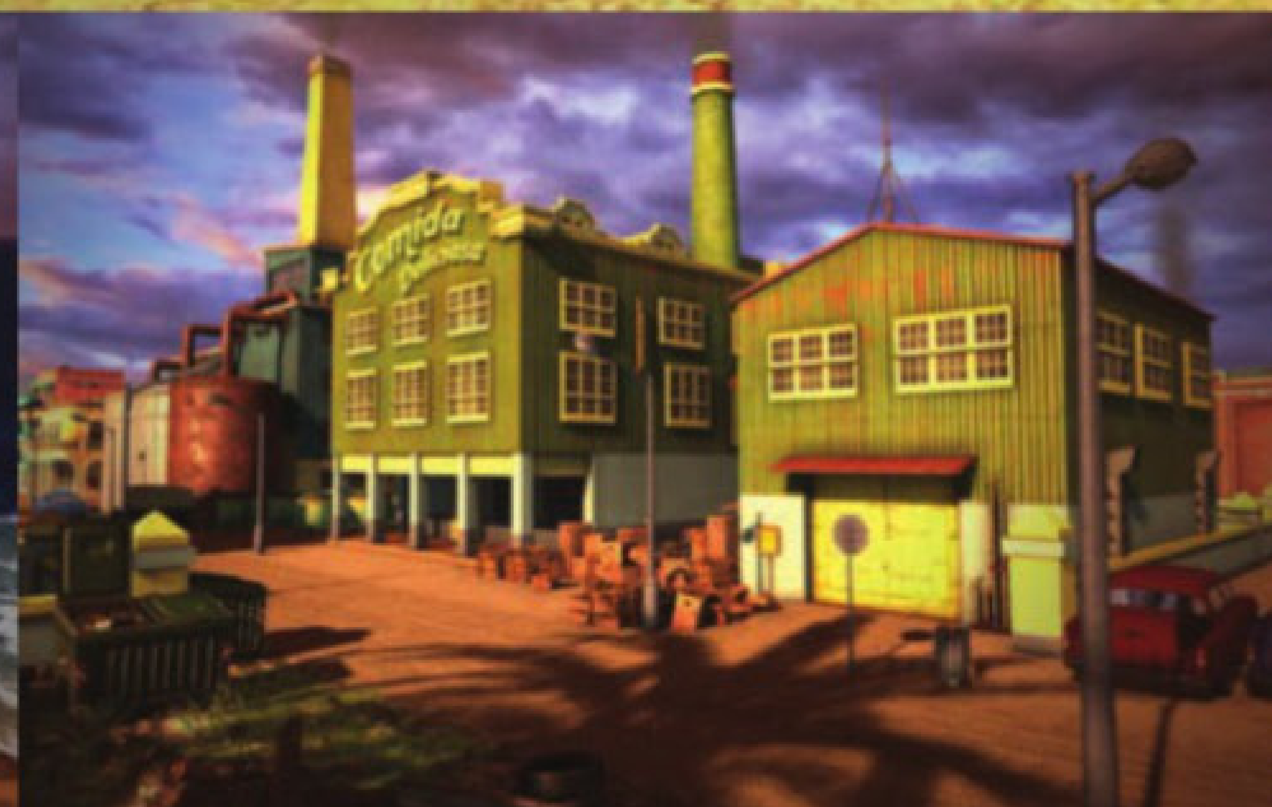
Tropico 5 is, unfortunately, hit with the same affliction. It's initially fun, fairly funny and its systems of corruption and deceit will have you leering an evil grin throughout (unless you opt

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox 360, Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: Bulgaria
PUBLISHER: Kalypso Media
DEVELOPER: Haemimont Games
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista/7/8, 2 GHz Dual Core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 400/AMD Radeon HD 4000/Intel HD 4000 or higher, 4GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No







FAQs

Q. HOW DEEP?
It has more depth than previous *Tropico* games, but it still suffers the same fate of becoming boring at a certain point.

Q. COMBAT?
As before, it returns and it's just as hands-off as ever. This isn't an RTS, but more control would be nice.

Q. CUTTING SATIRE?
No, but then the *Tropico* series never has been. It raises the odd smirk, though.



EVENTUALLY YOU THINK NOTHING OF HAVING DISSIDENTS DRAGGED OUT OF THEIR HOMES AND EXECUTED





Below: The revolution can be televised, though only if you deem it necessary to build a TV station for your Tropicans.





out of taking advantage of them, naturally), but a mere few hours in you'll hit a wall – and the experience doesn't recover.

There are a number of new additions to *Tropico 5*, such as citizens having individual roles, both beneficial (managers for your factories upping production levels), and antagonistic (the aforementioned rebel leader). This is interesting and it's fun to see the dissidents spread throughout your township as the police (secret or otherwise) uncover them, but beyond putting a face to the rebel and automating some micromanagement processes, it doesn't really change the experience much.

Similarly, the reworked and improved trade systems bring to *Tropico 5* a good deal of simplification to a very important system – but this amounts to you clicking a few different icons then watching as some numbers grow (or shrink) here and there. It's not captivating, it involves little in the way of strategy and it lacks real depth. While trade has an effect on diplomacy with world superpowers, and diplomacy with world superpowers has an effect on trade, that is, again, little more than numbers and icons.

One new element we were really hopeful about was the addition of eras: beginning in the colonial era, players move through the world wars, the cold war and into modern times. Each era brings with it new technologies and upgraded buildings, as well as new concerns from the citizens of Tropico – the religious make way for the communists, the need for environmentalist thinking begins to outweigh the need for llama wool and so on.

Reacting to the changing times and the changing needs of the people should have been brilliant. Instead it's just bland. Not bad, per se, but nowhere near as captivating – or, again, strategic – as we had originally hoped. Alongside this, it doesn't help that your people change their minds on a seemingly minute-to-minute basis, with real digging needed to find out that everyone seems to hate you because you forgot to build a restaurant in one particular residential district.

It's that transient nature of things that really harms the experience though. While incredibly careful management – or outright cheating – will get things sorted in the main part, there seems little you can do to stop the tide of negativity forming in front of El Presidente. Were there more definite, measurable and, dare we say, predictable responses to your decisions, it would add to the experience and make for deeper strategy. As it stands, the game almost appears to work on impulse and overreaction, your people punishing you for the slightest of infractions with a rebellion, your armies suddenly understaffed for no discernable reason and 200 homeless people walking the streets while subsidised, affordable housing sits completely empty across the road from their shacks.

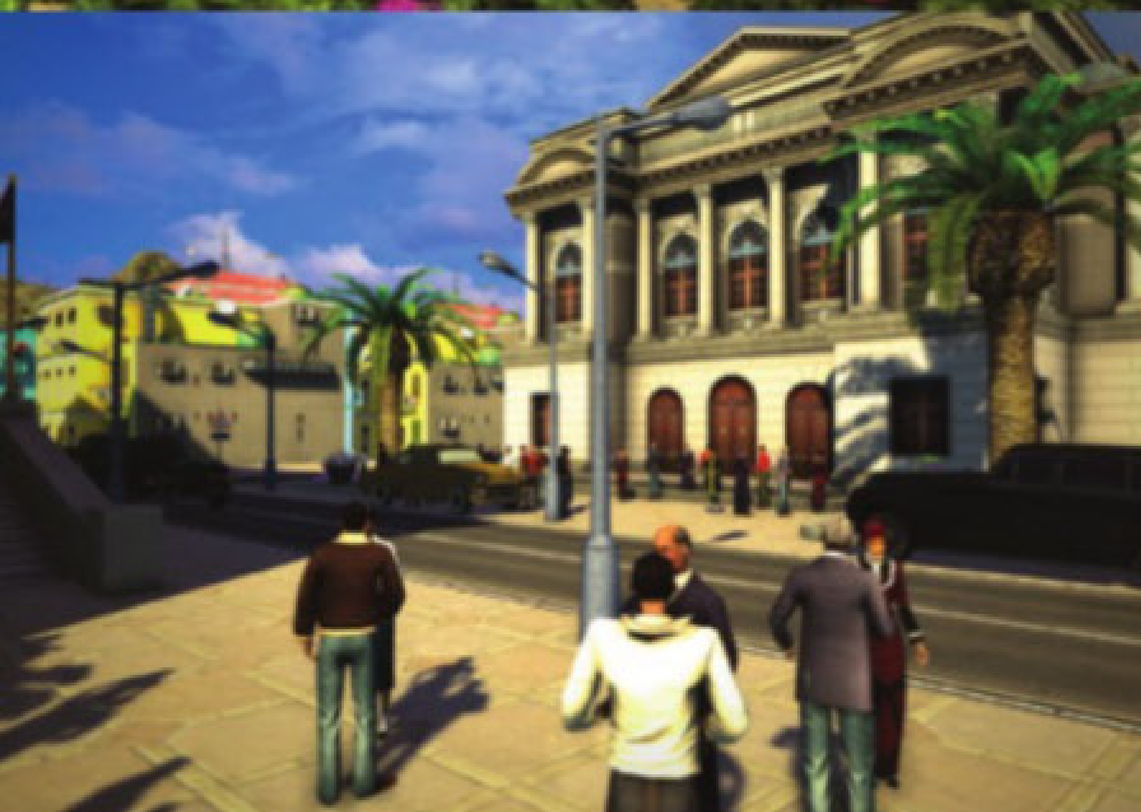
Throw on top of all of this the completely pointless additions of fog of war and El Presidente having a dynasty and you're left feeling that these additions – while ultimately well-meaning – have mostly missed the mark.

There's a lot to like about *Tropico 5* in its early stages, and the addition of multiplayer, both cooperative and competitive, is likely to make the game last a lot longer than it otherwise would, but all too soon the experience becomes bland and, just as it often has done in the past, *Tropico 5* veers off into banality the more time you put into it.

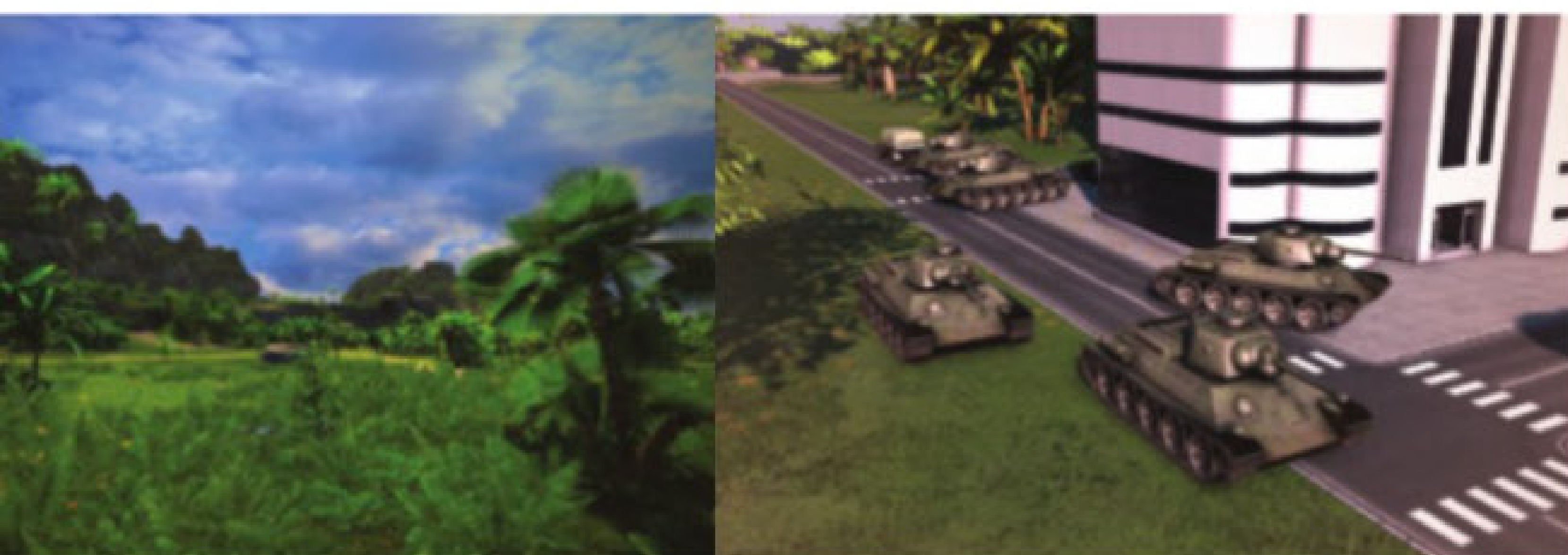
While the great entries to the *Sim City* series, the *Civilizations* of the world, even Ubisoft's *Anno* series and *Galactic Civilizations II* all give more back the more you put into it, *Tropico 5* is unable to do that. A lack of longevity in a game that should last so very long is just, ultimately, disappointing.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ENDING ERAS: Previous games only took in one vague period of time, but *Tropico 5* adds progression through four distinct eras – giving you more of a reason to want to progress.



Left: The whims of your populace change on a minute-to-minute basis and can be hard to keep up with. Unrest is near-certain.



R&D BY THE SEA

Research is a big part of the *Tropico* experience, having only been vaguely touched on in past iterations. What this amounts to is simply a case of building structures to increase your available research points (colleges, for example) and selecting which technology/edict/constitution update to look into. It's a welcome addition on the face of things, but when you get down to it, it's easy to see this is a very straightforward, linear addition with none of the tactical research decisions you see in the likes of *Civilization V* or *Galactic Civilizations II* – you just make your way through everything, deciding which of three options to do first. It could have added depth; instead it just adds a roadblock to progression.

VERDICT 6/10
NOT A FAILED STATE, BUT NOT THE REVOLUTION EITHER

THE VETERAN BRAWLER RETURNS TO THE RING

Ultra Street Fighter IV

Below: Decapre's moves rarely leave her as visible as she is in this screenshot, as her speedy nature makes her often little more than a ghostly afterimage. Conversely, her Super and Ultra moves are slower and more deliberate.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PLAYSTATION 3
OTHER FORMATS: XBOX 360, PC
ORIGIN: XBOX 360, PC
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: DIMPS
PRICE: £11.99 (UPGRADE) / £29.99 (FULL)
RELEASE: 03/06/2014 (UPGRADE) / 05/08/2014 (FULL)
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-6 ONLINE)
ONLINE REVIEWED: NO

Perhaps the greatest myth surrounding *Street Fighter IV* was that it was somehow more accessible than its predecessors. The game certainly revitalised the fighting game market by reviving recognisable characters in a visually appealing game with a familiar feel, but with a Super bar, an Ultra bar, Focus attacks and EX attacks, it was certainly no less complicated than *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*. Five years on, and several contenders to the throne later, *Ultra Street Fighter IV* remains unapologetically hardcore, offering even more options for the expert fighter alongside a small amount of extra content.

The new content comes in the form of five additional fighters. The only brand new character is Decapre, a fighter sporting the incredibly unexciting "doll" character design used by minions of M Bison in previous games. Thankfully, she proves rather more interesting to actually play, with specials that enable quick forward movement at a variety of angles, and an ultra combo which provides a slow but incredibly damaging projectile. The remaining four fighters – Elena, Hugo, Poison and Rolento – are familiar returning faces, all of whom were last featured in *Street Fighter X Tekken* and retain their move sets from that game. We're not necessarily complaining about that – they're all fine additions to the roster – but it's clear that the motivation for their inclusion was simple availability.

The rest of the major gameplay changes relate to the game's systems, and it's here that the game's hardcore focus becomes obvious. Ultra combos have previously been restricted to one per character in-game, though players have had a choice of two since *Super Street Fighter IV*. There is now a third option which allows access to both, balanced by reductions in the damage of each. The effect of this change varies depending on your chosen character – the flexibility most benefits those with two very different moves such as Fei Long and Cammy, but those two characters receive larger damage reductions than many others.

A new form of Focus attack has also been introduced. Red Focus attacks are performed at the cost of two segments of the Super bar, but offer great utility in that they can absorb any number of hits (rather than the one hit of a regular Focus attack), and absorbed damage builds the Ultra meter at double speed. This provides an answer for characters with multi-hit attacks that were previously difficult to focus against, such as Yang. It's an interesting change, but one that seems fair – those characters which had advantages against focus before retain it, due to the requirement to sacrifice Super bar.

FOR THE HARDCORE FAN BASE, THE CHANGES WILL SERVE TO REVITALISE THE GAME FOR ANOTHER YEAR OR TWO

The last of the system changes is the introduction of a delayed stand-up. By hitting two buttons as the character hits the floor, the character will stay down longer. Alongside the quick-stand, this alters the dynamics of the wake-up game, in which players will commonly throw a projectile timed to arrive as the opponent stands, forcing a disadvantageous block.



Of course, no fighting game revision would be complete without balance changes, and *Ultra Street Fighter IV* has made subtle adjustments and tweaks to every character, balancing speed, damage and move properties. For example, Ken's crouching heavy kick has had its start-up time reduced by one frame, making it slightly easier to punish with, but its recovery time has been increased by two frames, making it a little more risky and open to punishment itself. T Hawk's movement speed has been increased, Guile's health has been reduced by five percent.

If these tweaks sound small and hard to notice, that's because for the majority of players, they are. If you've previously owned a version of *Street Fighter IV* that you stopped playing at some point, it's fair to say that *Ultra Street Fighter IV*'s additions are unlikely to make enough of a difference to return you to the fold. These small balance changes are designed for the competitive players who never stopped playing, the tournament



LEARNING THE ROPES

If you've missed out on previous *Street Fighter IV* releases and want to get involved, but have heeded the review's warning about willingness to learn, it should be noted that the game includes the trial mode from previous releases. This gives players a grounding in how to perform attacks and link up basic combos, but the game doesn't do a lot to explain many of its mechanics, which means you'll be left high and dry when it comes to performing advanced techniques. The community has stepped in to fill the void on this front, and a variety of tutorial videos are available to study online before you take your first step into the challenging world of competitive play.

FAQs

Q. IS THIS DLC?
Yes, it's available as an upgrade for *Super Street Fighter IV* and *Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition.*

Q. NEW SINGLE-PLAYER MODES?
No, these modes are much the same as in the previous *Street Fighter IV* releases.

Q. ANY NEW BACK-GROUNDS?
Yes, and rather like most of the new characters they've been recycled from *Street Fighter X Tekken.*



Left: Backgrounds from *Street Fighter X Tekken* are easily identifiable, having received only the minimum of work to remove *Tekken* references.

Above: Hugo is as towering a presence as he was in *Street Fighter III*, filling the majority of the screen. His animations also retain their chaotic quality, as he flails around during both movement and attacks.

regulars with custom arcade sticks. For this hardcore fan base, such changes will serve to revitalise the game for another year or two of regular play.

In fact, it might well go beyond one or two years, as *Ultra Street Fighter IV* allows players access to a much wider metagame. When a character is selected, a version of that character is also selected, allowing the top-tier Cammy of *Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition 2012* to be pitted against the Sagat that terrorised players of *Street Fighter IV*. It's the definitive version of *Street Fighter IV* as a result.

For all of the focus on catering to the heavily invested players, it should not be forgotten that these are small changes to one of the best fighting games of its generation, and still well worth picking up if you haven't already. *Ultra Street Fighter IV* remains a very good game, and as such it should come recommended not only to the veterans that will get the most from the new changes, but to those players that don't already own a version of *Street Fighter IV*.

However, any recommendation has to come with a caveat – the accumulated changes of the last five years have made the game a much larger and more complex prospect than the game which revitalised the fighting game market. It's still not as complex as the output of Arc System Works, but you'll need to be willing to learn to get the most out of *Ultra Street Fighter IV*. For lapsed *Street Fighter IV* fans, *Ultra Street Fighter IV* doesn't add enough to justify itself. But for the hardcore audience it's aimed at, it is a logical end point to an important series and for new recruits, it's the definitive version of a landmark game.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DECAPRE'S DESIGN We know that the design has heritage, but M Bison's "dolls" are now rather numerous. A new design would have better complemented the character's unique style of play.

VERDICT 8/10
A WORTHY RETIREMENT BOUT



Above: Rolento remains a favourite member of the cast – his rolling, leaping and knife-throwing give him a fast-paced style of play.

GAME OF CLONES

Bound By Flame

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4

OTHER FORMATS: PS3, XBOX 360, PC

ORIGIN: France

PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive

DEVELOPER: Spiders

PRICE: £44.99

RELEASE: Out now

PLAYERS: 1

ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Deliberate or otherwise, French studio Spiders' timing is pretty sweet. *The Witcher 3* – which this game definitely isn't – has been pushed back by a whole year and the next single-player *Elder Scrolls* – which this game isn't either – is still coalescing somewhere in Bethesda Softworks' equivalent of Fort Knox. *Bound By Flame* has Q2 very much to itself, so if you had just discovered videogames and had been covering your ears to any office talk about the latest HBO fantasy series, you would probably think that this was an original and engaging action role-playing game.

It's not. For the last 150 years, the world of Vertiel has been subject to the invasion of seven 'Lords of Ice' (like *The Lord Of The Rings*), bringing an eternal winter to every conquest (like *Game Of Thrones*), with their 'Deadarmy' (like almost everything). The protagonist is called Vulcan (like *Star Trek*?) and there's a big cult ritual where he gets possessed by a demon or something, then has some kind of persistent moral dilemma for the rest of the game, the outcome of which is decided by the choices the player makes.

Bound By Flame has no sandbox or open-world gameplay. Like *The Witcher 2*, each self-contained chapter has a handful of side-quests but nothing that can really distract you from the fact that you're being channelled down a linear path that will finish with a limited set of permutations. Gameplay doesn't stretch far beyond quests to kill monsters – or to run around a populated backwater chatting to NPCs lifted from a Nineties fantasy drama, who are stuck in a limbo that glues them to the spot until Vulcan achieves the next quest checkpoint and the narrative moves forward.

The story, writing and the role-playing part of the game are distinctly last-gen play, if not older. Shouty alpha males with python-like arms that look like they've all been cast from the same He-Man mould abound; one-dimensional, athletic females clad in impractical bikini-armour are everywhere.



Above: Companions will follow you on your quests throughout most of your game, depending on the dialogue choices and actions you make. They'll give you a helping hand in battle and also change the course of conversation.

Below: Here we have a classic case of demon possession: note the tried and tested flaming aura and apparent ecstasy/agony of the subject. Green puke is a myth.



FAQs

Q. WHAT IS THE DEMON?
It's a vehicle for moral dilemma and some unintentionally amusing scenes where Vulcan starts talking in a weird demonic voice.

Q. WHAT BADDIES ARE THERE?
The creatures of Vertiel include a bestiary of natural opponents, but the undead hordes are the most fun to fight.

Q. ARE THERE BOSSES?
Of course. We're not going to give the game away, but they're generally very big and quite impressive.

Below: Contrary to what the title suggests, it's combat that holds *Bound By Flame* together, even if moving from one zone to the next is a pretty derivative experience.



Crafty

While the actual discovery of crafting items is pretty mundane (they drop off baddies or are found in glittering piles), crafting itself can turn you fighter into a whirling firestorm of death, if carefully considered. Ammunition for your crossbow, potions, weapons and equipment upgrades can easily be forged on the spot, if you have the right crafting items. You can even use some crafting items to make others. We found ourselves scouring every corner of each chapter for any items we might have missed, which was a bit of a chore but a worthwhile long-term investment because of the huge difference it made to the combat experience.

SHOUTY ALPHA MALES WITH PYTHON-LIKE ARMS THAT LOOK LIKE THEY'VE ALL BEEN CAST FROM THE SAME HE-MAN MOULD ABOUND

And graphically, you couldn't set this apart from an average-looking PS3 game. But in case you began to think you had picked up a game from the second-hand section of the store, there's swearing! The potty-mouthed population of Vertiel does enjoy punctuating its sentences with 'shit', 'bollocks' and even the odd f-word, that way you know *Bound By Flame* is edgy and different… except to *The Witcher*. But, then, it's definitely not *The Witcher*, so that's okay.

To give *Bound By Flame* some credit, there's a fair bit of flexibility in the crafting, skill and combat systems. At least in this, there's an appreciable amount of the exploration and experimentation that veteran role-players crave and will otherwise find wanting here. Levelling up is relatively fast, bringing in a bounty of attribute points that allow Vulcan to upgrade a trifecta of ability trees to mastering the ways of the warrior, the assassin or sorcerer. We would go so far as to say the crafting system can sometimes actually be more satisfying and less arbitrary in *Bound By Flame* than a certain other action role-playing game.

We enjoyed the combat most of all, partly because of the variety of skills that were made available to us and the judicious pace at which we were able to improve Vulcan's abilities. Once the fire demon is on board and the arcane part of Vulcan's skill tree becomes available to him, a whole world of rhythmic and twitchy swordplay complemented by dramatic bursts of fire magic became the reason for navigating our way from one trite conversation with a fantasy stereotype to the next. Fortunately, there are plenty of spots where Vulcan can wade knee deep in the undead, and most of them can be picked up at the player's discretion.

This isn't enough to save *Bound By Flame* from mediocrity though, especially when we found ourselves tapping circle through stale dialogue to skip to the next sequence. We've got a quest summary in our inventory journal that will pick up the necessary detail, plus a mini-map with a compass that will conveniently point the way to primary and secondary quest locations: why not cut the middle-man out, give Vulcan a bungee cord to drag him through all the bland corridor-running and conversation, then we can go away to make a cup of tea before the next fight.

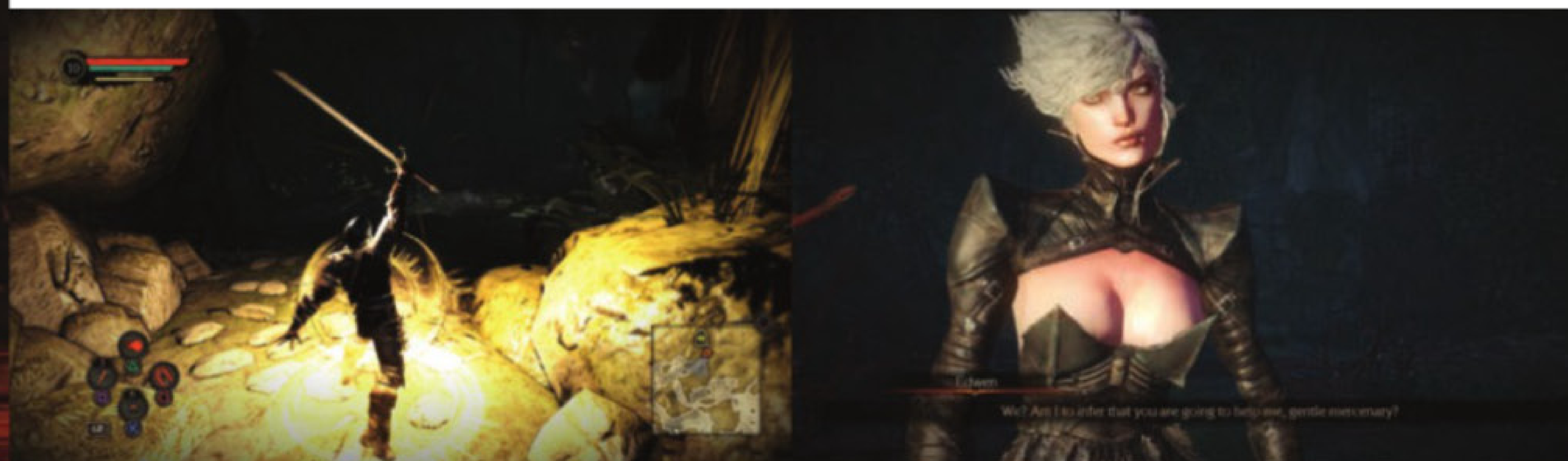
Combat and crafting was compelling enough for us to consider awarding *Bound By Flame* a lofty seven out of ten, but then our game crashed. Perhaps it was the way Vulcan threw a door open in the dramatic fashion he favours, camera zooming over his shoulder, one to many times. Whatever caused it, our save was irrevocably corrupted and any chance of playing *Bound By Flame* beyond our review went down the pan with it.

Not that this should be the death knell for your purchase decision too, you probably won't encounter the same game-breaking problem and maybe you haven't experienced the worlds of Westeros, Tamriel and the Northern Kingdoms. Good for you. Not only are you more likely to enjoy all the talking between every fight but there are four seasons of compelling HBO drama and several weeks of exhaustive, back to back playtime across two chart-topping videogame franchises, once you're done.

For the vast majority of role-playing gamers who are thinking of filling that void that *Witcher 3* has left in its absence, here's an occasionally interesting, somewhat laughable and largely humdrum alternative: break out that button-tapping thumb callous and brace yourself for the eye-rolling incredulity, *Bound By Flame* is the most forgettable experience you'll have this summer.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SANDBOX EXPLORATION The world of Vertiel could really benefit from an *Elder Scrolls*-type sandbox world. If nothing else this would at least distinguish it from the first two *Witcher* games, which it otherwise fails so hard to not be like.



VERDICT 6/10
MORE FIGHT, LESS TALK

SOUL BLADE

Transistor

Identity is a rare thing in videogames development. Only a few studios have the capacity and the vision to create in their own image; FROM, Platinum, arguably Rockstar. Smaller teams inevitably find it easier, but few could claim such a strong sense of self than San Francisco's Supergiant Games, whose masterful debut *Bastion* has been followed here by the aesthetically analogous *Transistor*.

Once again, we're treading through hand-painted isometric landscapes, battling enemies and listening to a flawlessly-pitched voice over as the action unfolds. Instead of 'The Kid', *Transistor* stars Red, a singer famous in the technologically advanced metropolis of Cloudbank, who has had her voice stolen by an unknown enemy. At the start of the game, she yanks a giant blue sword out of a slumped corpse; a sword called Transistor that has captured the soul and voice of Red's lover. The game then takes the two on a journey to discover what happened to them both, and how they're going to get their respective voice and body back. It's an obtuse story. Nothing is explicit; everything suggested and never explained. It is, quite simply, asking a lot of the player. In some respects this is admirable – Supergiant refuses to condescend or patronise its audience – but at times the narrative is so threadbare that it proves distracting and makes the experience feel aimless.

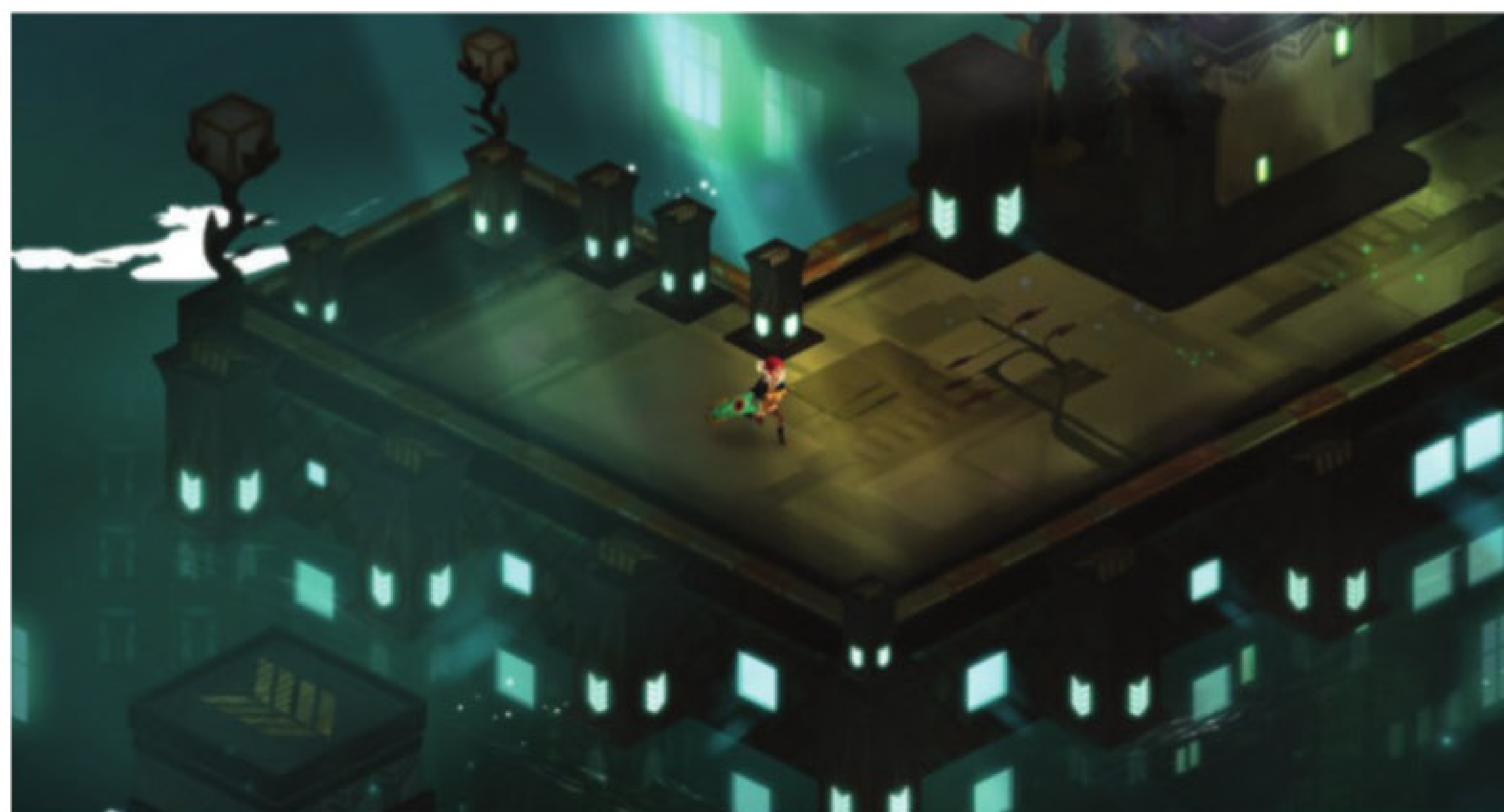
The same lack of handholding is also applied to the mechanics, although here we're in far more confident and complete territory. *Transistor* makes great strides over its hack-and-slash forebear, crafting something uniquely intriguing, but a little tricky to explain. Essentially, Red can activate four attacks, one per face button. She can also freeze time, activating a 'turn'. From here, she can move around the map, and execute specific attacks, with every action depleting a bar at the top of the screen. Plan as much as you can, then hit R2 to watch it all play out, before running off to hide while your time-freezing ability recharges. It's an inventive system, blending the tactical nuance of a turn-based RPG with the pace of an action game. It's not dissimilar to *Fallout 3*'s VATS in terms of how a battle flows, but there is a much greater emphasis on angles and positioning. As you progress, you learn enemy attack patterns and traits, meaning that you can plan for almost every outcome and deliver as much damage as you possibly can.

This battle system is joined by a very creative weapon upgrade path. As you level up, you unlock 'functions' (weapons, essentially). These can be assigned to the four face buttons as you see fit, so you might have Crash on one (a standard melee), Jaunt on another (a dodge) and Burst on a third (a laser that can cut through multiple enemies in a line). Brilliantly, though, any of these functions can also be used as a secondary buff to another, essentially combining their

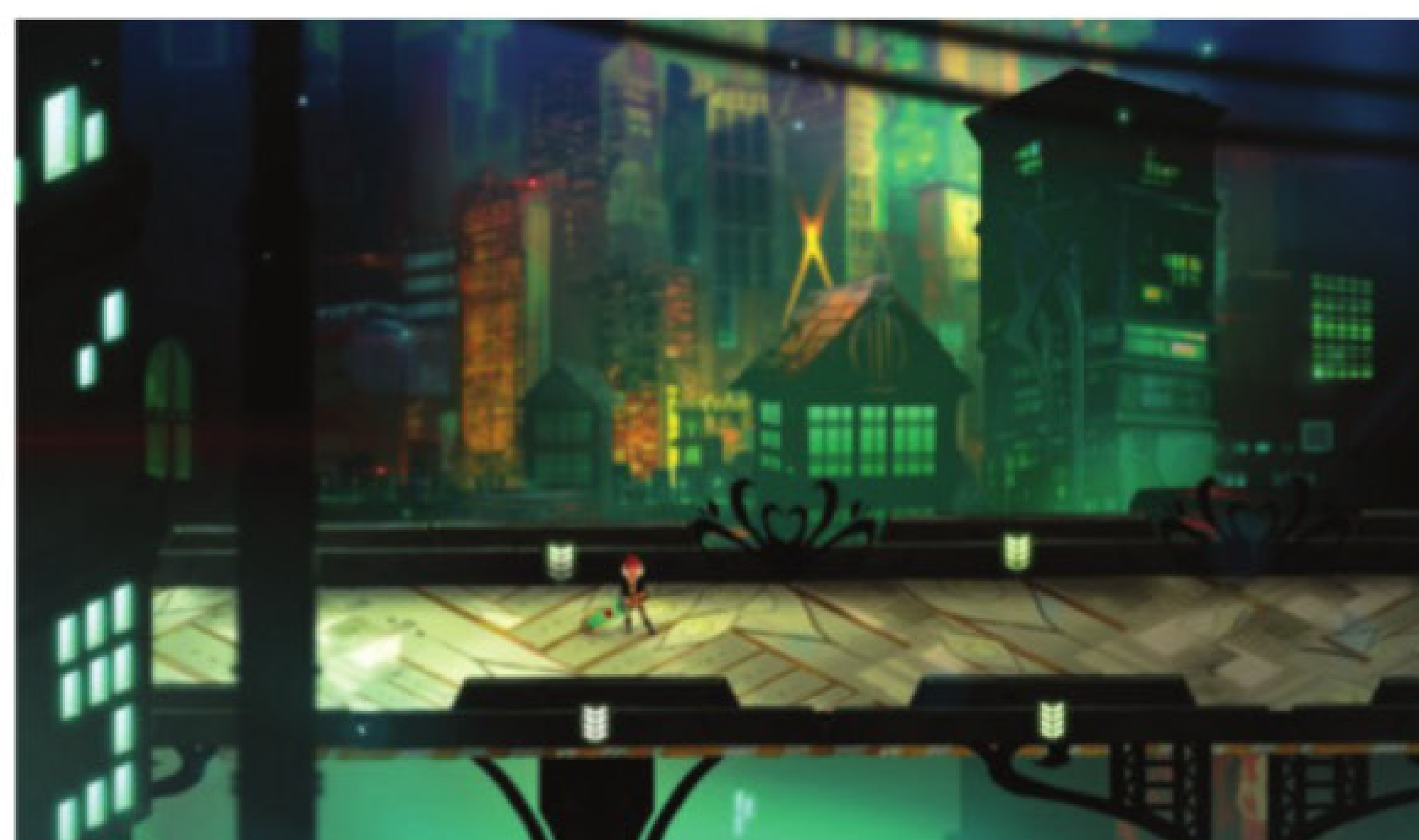
DETAILS

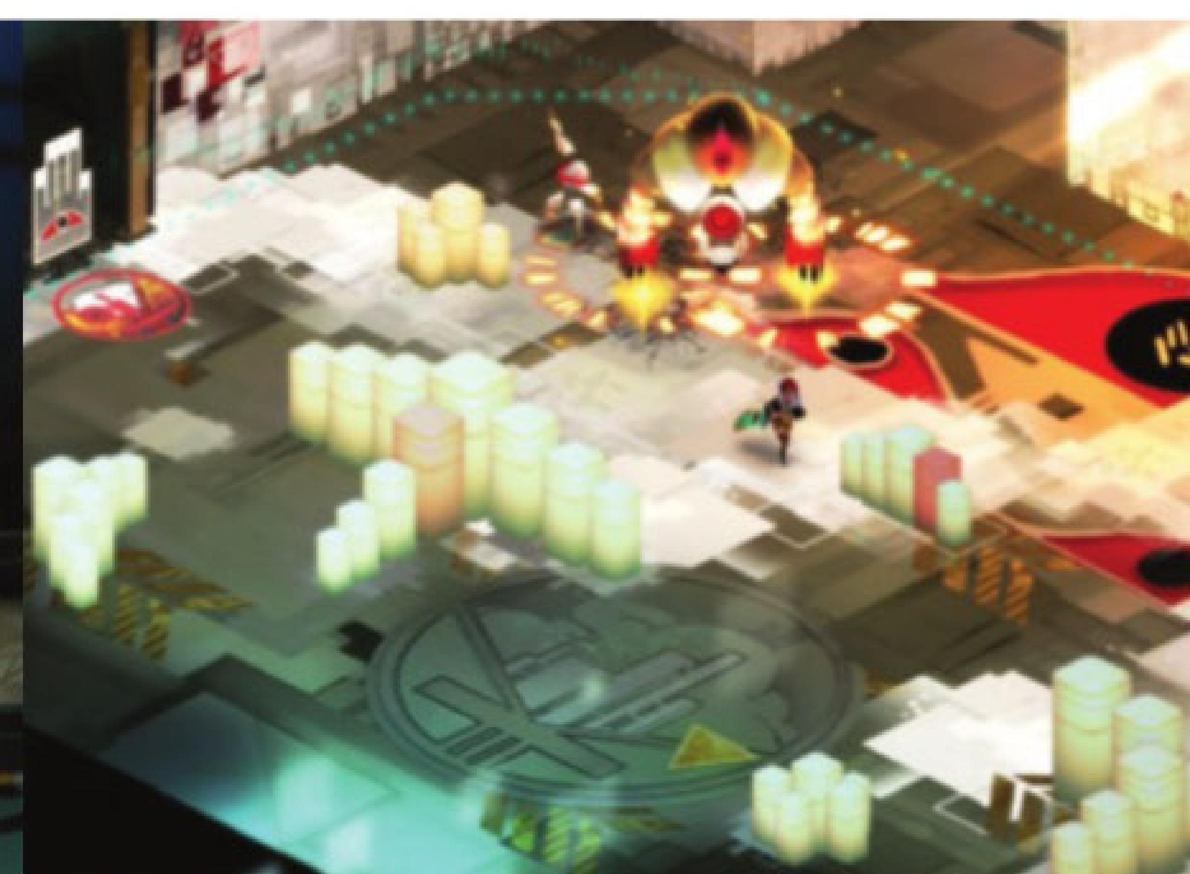
FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Supergiant Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: Supergiant Games is a bold and confident studio, and now with the prevalence of self-publishing, will likely go from strength to strength.



Above: Supergiant's artists have excelled in *Transistor*, creating a city that feels both familiar and otherworldly. Cloudbank is a cold, distancing place, overrun by technology and lacking in humanity.







Right: You could play *Transistor* like a traditional action game, but it's designed to be done by freezing and unfreezing battles at opportune moments.

TRANSISTOR'S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT IS MANAGING ALL THIS COMPLEXITY WITHOUT THE NEED TO OVERTLY EXPLAIN ANY OF IT.





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Only four hours or so.

Q. IS IT THE SAME AS BASTION?
A lot more complicated to play, but less narratively gratifying

Q. IS THERE A VOICE-OVER?
Yes. Same actor too, although this time it's a character in the story rather than a narrator.



PLAY IT AGAIN SAM

Given its brevity and obtuse storytelling, *Transistor* encourages multiple playthroughs by limiting some of its content on your initial run through the story. The New Game Plus mode offers a much stricter challenge, with remixed enemy line-ups and higher-level opponents, counter balanced by new 'functions' unlocked as you reach the maximum levels. More interesting, though, is the fact the story actually reacts to your second playthrough, changing key details and layering on more context as you pass back through the narrative. It's still open to interpretation, but you will feel slightly less lost if you have the patience to battle through to the end a second time.



powers. You can also use them as a passive buff to your character. The number of feasible combinations is mind-boggling, and every one will have a completely different load out and tactical approach.

Transistor's greatest achievement is managing all this complexity without the need to overtly explain any of it. The information is in there, but at no point are you sat reading reams of text. You gradually learn more about the system by experimentation, and the flow of unlocks means you never feel overwhelmed. By the end of the story (a brief four hours), you'll have a keen understanding of the intricacies of the system, and will be ready to tackle a new game plus playthrough with a much stronger arsenal and a wealth of tactical knowledge.

As clever as the battle system is, though, it rarely thrills. It's a functional, enjoyable set of rules and ideas that often makes you marvel at its malleability, but the battles themselves lack the unpredictability of a classic turn-based scrap, or the reactive pace of a great action game. Despite the variety in how you can deal damage, most fights boil down to spamming enemies as much as possible before disappearing behind some kind of cover for a few seconds. Enemies rarely surprise and don't interact with each other in clever ways – it's just a *Royal Rumble* every time you get into a fight.

With the story being so thin and deliberately vague, *Transistor* can feel quite distanced when you're playing it, as if it's a game designed for someone else. At its strongest, the beautiful visuals, incredible music and wonderful voice-work create something that's genuinely wonderful – a world you just want to soak in and hold in the highest esteem possible – but neither the narrative nor the systems ever let you get that close. A second playthrough gives you a greater grasp of the combat and adds layers to the story, but it never manages to grab you like you feel that it should. Those who work hard by reading every piece of backstory in the menus and studying every single corner of the world may uncover the game's true heart, while the rest of us will likely be impressed, but not necessarily enthralled.

This is a love story at heart, but one that makes you work hard to get swept up in. There's a beauty on the game's surface, but it doesn't let you get deep enough for its payoff to truly strike home. *Transistor* is a game conscientious gamers will want to love. It's clearly a work of true vision and artistic intent, backed up with skilfully constructed systems. Just like the technical artifice in which it's set, though, it never quite feels like home.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VOICE-OVER: *Transistor*'s beautifully pitched narration confirms SuperGiant's artistic aesthetic. They're a studio with a strong identity.

VERDICT 7/10
ARTISTICALLY CONFIDENT, BUT UNFORTUNATELY OBTUSE

NOT THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME, CERTAINLY THE MOST CIVILISED

Sir, You Are Being Hunted

Living in this time of uncertainty, it's good to know that even after the apocalypse, Standards Will Remain. Where just Arnie said "I'll be back", the tweed-wrapped terminators of *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* would have the good grace to request when would be a good time, and interrupt neither tea nor tiffin with the beastly business of killing all humans. For such is both polite and proper, and what British robot would even dream of being anything else?

Whether or not your character is equally good-mannered must be left to the imagination, but deadly they are not – and yes, the game name can be flipped to *Madam, You Are Being Hunted*, in one of many great little touches. Occasionally you get to fight back, and one of the optional starting loadouts even provides a couple of large guns for self-defence purposes, but primarily this is a game about carefully, methodically avoiding fights. It's one spent mostly staring at grass textures as you crouch in the moss and heathers of five procedurally generated islands, and that really tells you most of what you need to know here. The pace is glacial, until it gets brutally fast, and then it's back to painstakingly creeping through the fens and heathers until the next dreaded bleep of enemy detection or robot dog attack.

For the most part, this is very effective. *Sir* isn't a great looking game, with textures especially very poor, but its algorithms create good worlds – endearingly quirky mishmashes of villages with names like "Down Waddling" and "Royal Fitchet" to go along with the upper-class robots and dulcet tones of your manservant advisor, and an unusual colour palette that adds an otherworldly sense to the familiar. Each of the five islands can have its own biome, from Rural to Castle to Industrial, and while that doesn't affect the action as much as it might, it does at least mean regular changes of scenery. More or less. To a point. So much of the game is set out in the open that one field does soon feels much like another. As for built up areas, there aren't many assets, which results in the villages especially – more streets really – being depressingly identical, as well as having far too many branches of Worple

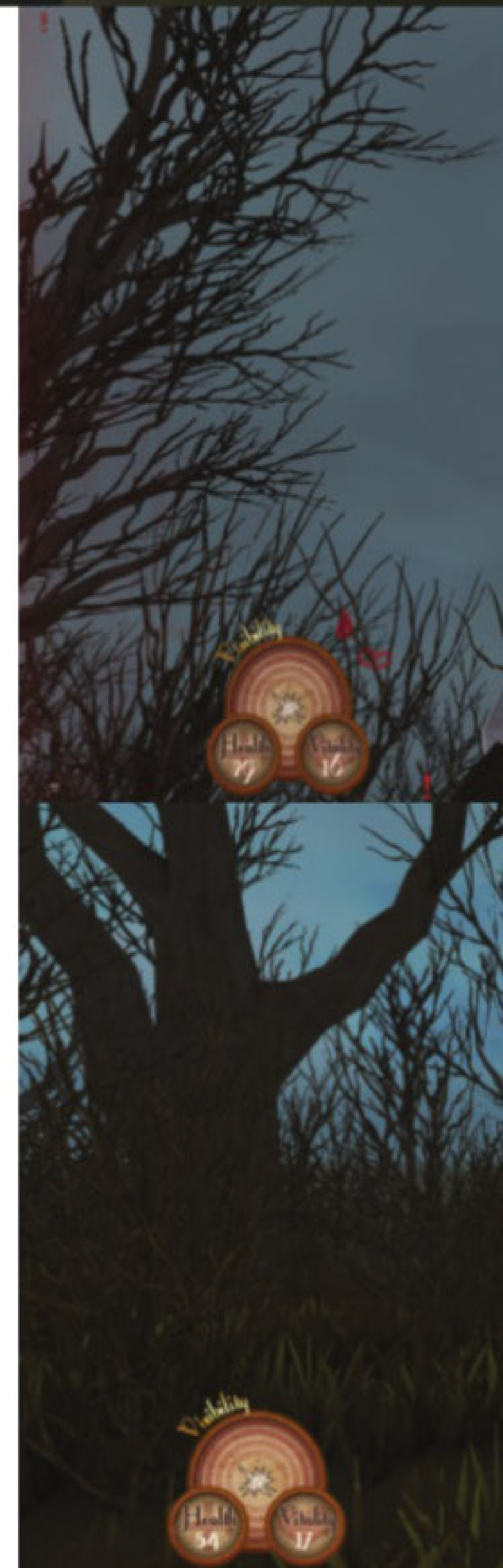
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Big Robot
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: The hunt get more dangerous as you play. At the start you'll barely even see patrols, but things are vicious as you claw closer to collecting all the items. Right: The robots don't just rely on guns. These face-attack dogs pin you down so their masters can shoot, and good luck out-running them. Of course, if you have traps and weapons of your own...

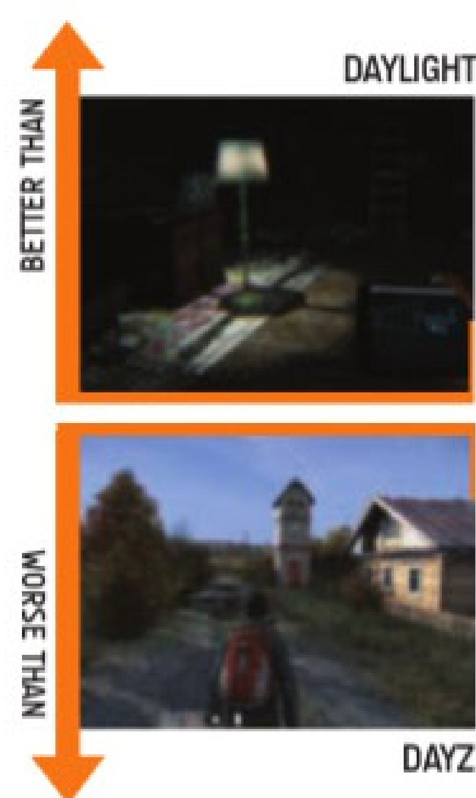




ISLAND CREATION

At the moment it's only possible to pick one of the five biomes for each of the five islands – Rural, Fens, Industrial, Castle or Mountain. Coming in a future patch will be the ability to dig more deeply into how those are created, with elements like the amount of concealing foliage and more (as yet unannounced) tweaks on offer. We're unlikely to see a full-on level editor, given the amount of focus *Sir* puts on its procedural generation options, though it will hopefully be possible to copy the seed that maps use and share them for competitive play, as well as change the number of islands and device pieces to collect to allow for shorter games.





FAQs

Q: WHERE'S THE MULTI-PLAYER?
It's coming, in some form. For now though, it's just you vs. the AI robots in an extended scavenger hunt.

Q: HOW DO YOU AVOID DETECTION?
You can turn on enemy markers. But for best play, you scope out areas with tools like binoculars first.

Q: CAN I SWITCH OFF THE UI FOR A PURE EXPERIENCE?
No, but it wouldn't work. You need the vitality and visibility displays.

and Tatt, Tweed Wholesalers. As ever though, while random generation allows for a new location every time, it's never going offers the raw sense of place as somewhere designed, like *DayZ*'s Chenarus.

What there is, though, has plenty of charm, from the patriotic crockery with pictures of a robot Queen to edible rats described as simply "You wouldn't… would you?" to letters full of stiff-upper-lippedness like "Father, you signed off as 'Dad', which can only lead to me thinking you are having a crisis. If it is because of something I have done, then please forgive me." The robots especially deserve praise, with their red glows easily spotted for a sense of distant menace, while up close their upper class babbling and incidental animations provide lots of personality that makes them feel like worthy opponents, not just wandering tin-cans.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BRITISH IMPERIALISM The ridiculously fancy upper-class tone of *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* is its best asset. It just wouldn't be the same without the tweed.

Their AI isn't great, but it's generally good enough and doesn't frustrate, allowing for tricks as basic as throwing a bottle as a distraction and as interesting as lighting a fire to draw small armies to one spot while fleeing in the other direction. Like many stealth games it suffers from the feeling that they're not so much failing to see you as not allowed to register your presence, before becoming psychically aware once triggered. Your goal being not to allow that to happen in the first place tends to cover that up though, and you have more than enough toys and open ground available that it happening is usually going your own fault for rushing.

The catch is that despite a strong premise and aesthetic, *Sir* doesn't have much meat on its bones. In particular, the overall objective is less a goal than an apathetic shrug over the mechanics – to collect 17 machine components from around the map, where '17' means 'too bloody many'. It's a real waste, as well as constantly drawing attention to how smaller games like *Spelunky* make use of shorter but more rewarding play sessions, and bigger ones at least will focus on the all important first one with more narrative depth and variety. Sir does dabble in a few other areas too, like survival against the elements

THE PACE IS GLACIAL, UNTIL IT GETS BRUTALLY FAST



Above: Junk? Junk! Somehow there's a bug in the code, that throwing this away does not immediately have one relocated to the Tower. **Left:** Oh, the language! *Sir*, you are letting yourself down! Also England! One would expect this from Q-Bert, but not here!

as well as robots, forcing you to raid villages (houses are just crates, you can't go in) for food and supplies, bandages for wounds and so on. However, they're generally trivial, and often when they're not, are a distraction from your challenging but often honestly quite boring fetch-and-retrieve quest.

The result of all this is a game that's certainly different and endearing, but struggles to keep up the initial momentum even during a single playthrough – never mind return visits. The best replayable games tend to benefit from surprise and the combination of many systemic layers, and *Sir* currently lacks both. Both the core mechanic and setting deliver on their promises, and committing so hard to swapping the usual hunter/hunted dynamic does make for a game unlike anything else, but neither can carry the full game. The planned addition of multiplayer may help this, as might additional layers later on. For now though, in its 1.0 iteration, *Sir* is much like its robots – clever, but lacking the spark to really bring it to life.

VERDICT 4/10

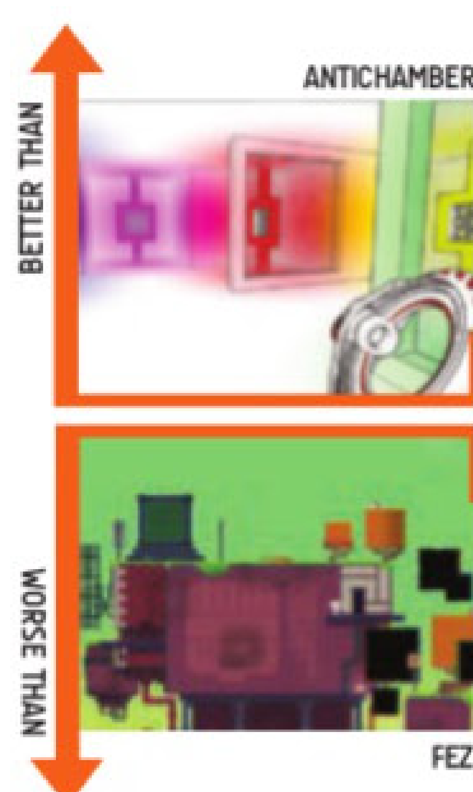
A GREAT CONCEPT THAT BURNS OUT ITS WELCOME FAST

IF DAFT PUNK MADE A GAME, THIS WOULD BE IT

Fract OSC

DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Phosfiend Systems
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows 7, Processor: Core i5 2.2 GHz or equivalent, Memory: 4 GB RAM, Graphics: Radeon 5850 or equivalent, DirectX: Version 9.0c, Hard Drive: 1500 MB available space
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



For a 'musical exploration game', there is surprisingly little music when traversing the world of *Fract*, but you can be sure this how the developers intended it. The prevailing silence goes hand in hand with the overarching minimalism found in the desolate future landscapes. Plus, it makes it all the more special when you do start to build a thumping electronic melody, piece by piece. It may take a while to get to that point, however. Not entirely sure of what you are doing or why you are doing it, the game drops you straight into the open world. There's a grand sense of mystery and discovery that can occasionally overstay its welcome and verge on frustration.

The world is certainly vast, initially overwhelmingly so. The landscape is littered with monolithic temples straight out of a *Tron/2001: Space Odyssey* mashup, just begging to explored. Bleeps and blorks guide you to objects that may be of no consequence at all, or may in fact hold the key to your progression. This blanket obscurity can lead to extended periods of stalemate. There are some annoyingly obtuse solutions, and how long you can last before reaching for the comforting hand of the internet entirely depends on your patience.

But, after the first few hours of cluelessly fumbling about, it all suddenly clicks and a distinct pattern becomes apparent. Over time, you'll shake off the disorientation and learn how the architecture subtly guides you to key areas; though there is still room for improvisation in your exploration. Puzzles themselves vary from classic block moving riddles, to *Pipe Mania*-style conundrums, as well as abstract rhythm music sequencers. But it's the presentation that makes these intriguing. A solved puzzle is all the more satisfying when you are visually and aurally rewarded with a culmination of thick synths and flashing lights.

FINGERPRINT

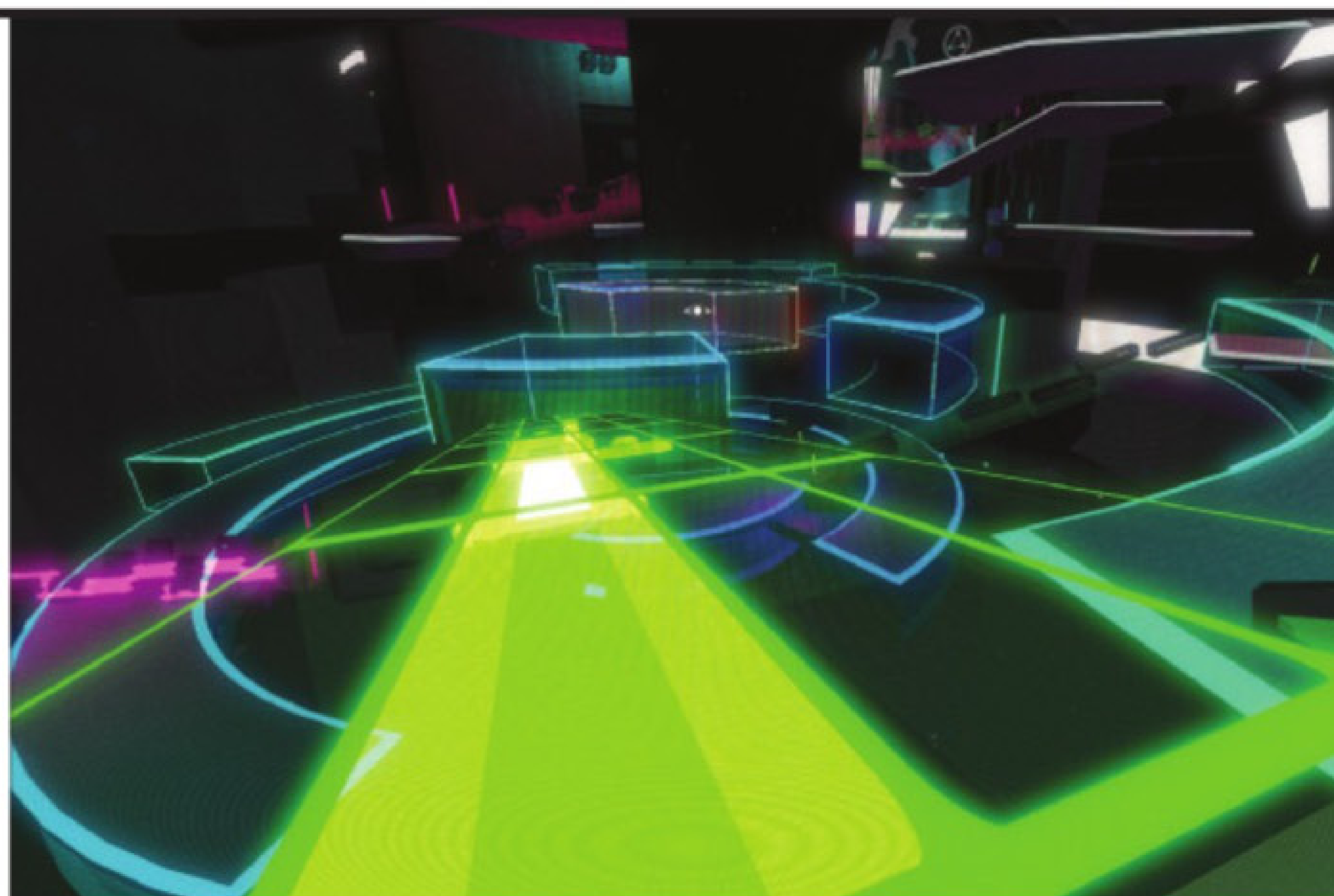
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN Not only is there a complete lack of any kind of tutorial, there is no HUD information, keeping your visual experience completely clear of clutter.

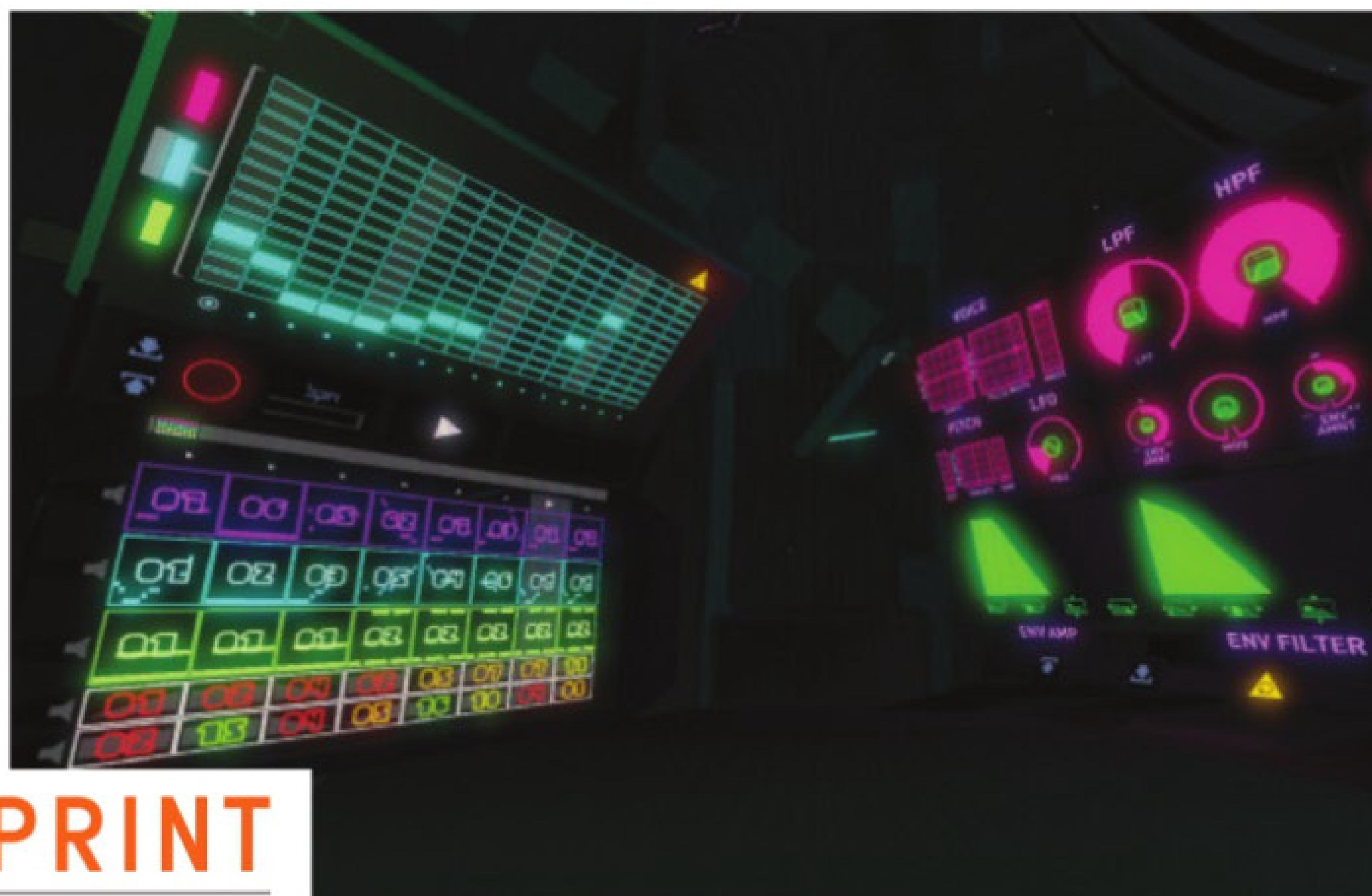
The music is delightful, humming and buzzing as you move from area to area, building layer upon layer when you get closer to completion. It's also genuinely creepy – you'll trick yourself into seeing obscure objects leap out of the shadows and be lured into various caves by the low rumble of a mechanical puzzle. Playing with headphones on is an engrossing, and highly recommended, experience.

Despite the purpose of your experience never even hinted at, it builds to a highly satisfying and visually stunning conclusion. It's enough to conjure up your own explanations while roaming around the cavernous spaces, fiddling away at the giant abandoned machinery of ancient civilisations. With all the haste of online gaming these days, the chance to lose yourself in a solitary and unyielding environment is perversely appealing. But, be warned, you may end up losing yourself a little longer than intended.

VERDICT 8/10
FRUSTRATING, BUT WITH PULSATING REWARDS.



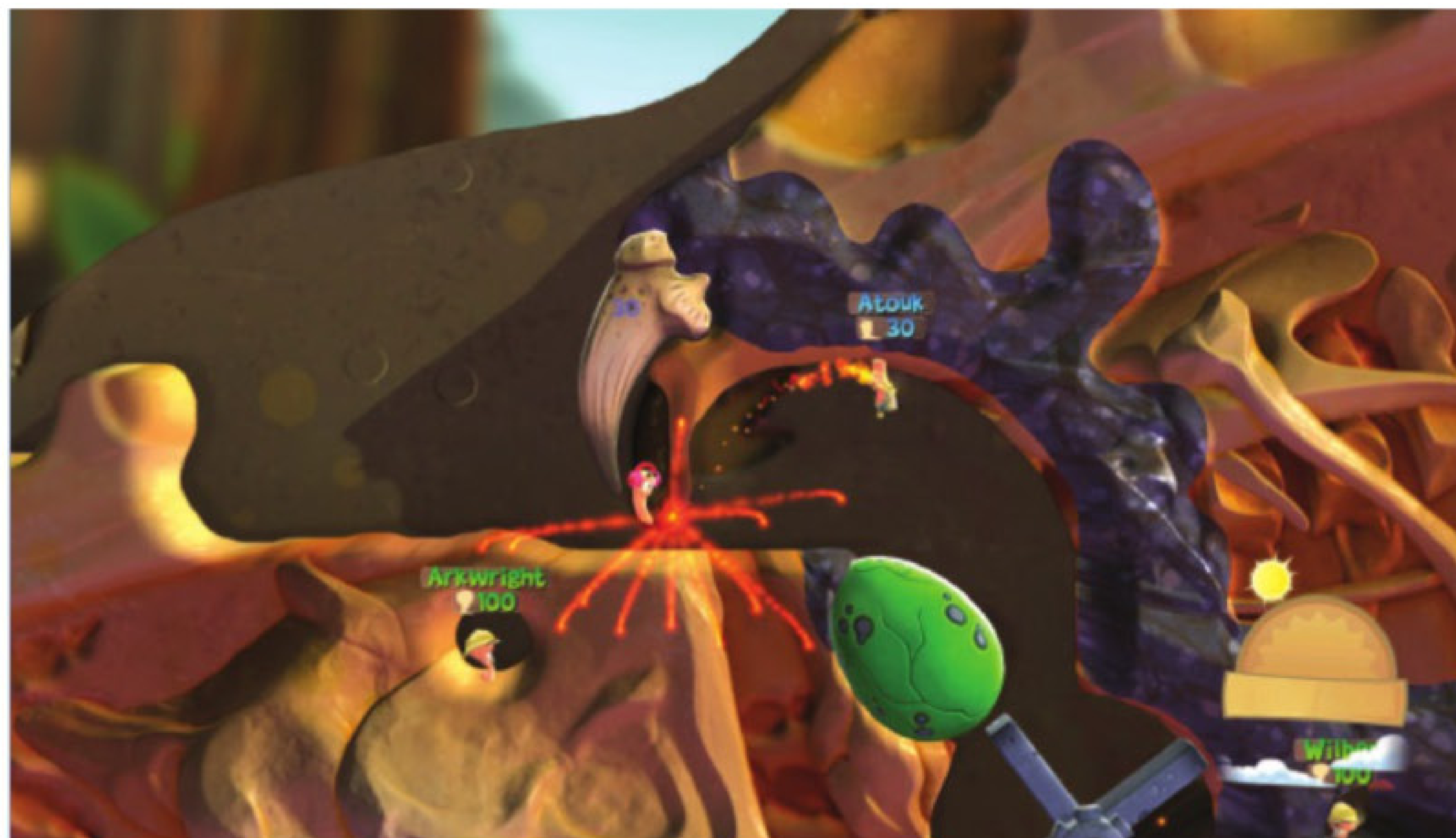
Above: As well as a funky background beat, there is a tangible reward for completing each puzzle in *Fract*; you'll unlock different synthesisers to be used in the studio hub, starting with simple beats.





Above: The vertical scan lines are an intentional effect that supplements the digital feel of the world. It really does feel like you fell into a *Tron* simulation, as cyber walkways assemble themselves beneath your feet and your path is littered with clumps of cuboid neon debris.

Below: There are now four 'classes' of worm, but the impact on gameplay is negligable at best.





Above: Hours later, we still couldn't tell you what half of the new weapons or tools do.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team 17
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

WORMS CRAZY GOLF



WORMS 2 ARMAGEDDON

WORSE THAN

THE GAME LITERALLY NOBODY BOUGHT A PS4 FOR

Worms Battlegrounds

New project meetings at Team 17 must be among the shortest in the industry. "I've got this great idea for a…" is about as far as anyone on team is likely to get before being shot down with the inevitable news that they're going to be making another *Worms* game. Of course they are. Why wouldn't they be? *Alien Breed* bombed hard, *Superfrog* should never have emerged from his energy drink-induced coma, so what else is there beside Ol' Reliable, the squiggly pink militia?

We do have to feel sorry for Team 17 in this respect – like Konami with *PES* back in the day or EA more recently with *FIFA*, the team peaked early. And with nothing more to do than iterate and add, there's only so much better a game can get. Since the 'one step forward, two steps back until someone notices' approach of footy games wouldn't exactly work for an indie like Team 17, the devs are left little choice but to keep adding and adding. But the horrible truth is that the more you add to a game like *Worms*, the more you stand to taint the purity that made it so good in the first place, and that's the principle issue with *Battlegrounds*.

Hit Circle to bring up your weapon options and a daunting grid of greyed-out options punches you in the face. Even though most are unavailable, it's still an overwhelming sight to behold, especially considering how much power this places in the laps of the RNG gods when weapon crates tumble from the heavens. With so many ways to avoid using actual skill to gauge wind direction for a pinpoint bazooka shot or time a cluster bomb detonation to perfection above a cluster of weaklings, nu-*Worms* is instead a game of luck, one where you hope the opponent doesn't teleport over to a weapon stash before you do. Cash drops are an interesting way of trying to restore balance, allowing funds to be traded for any available gear. But without a little luck on your side, you'll seldom be able to afford anything from the big spenders' menu.

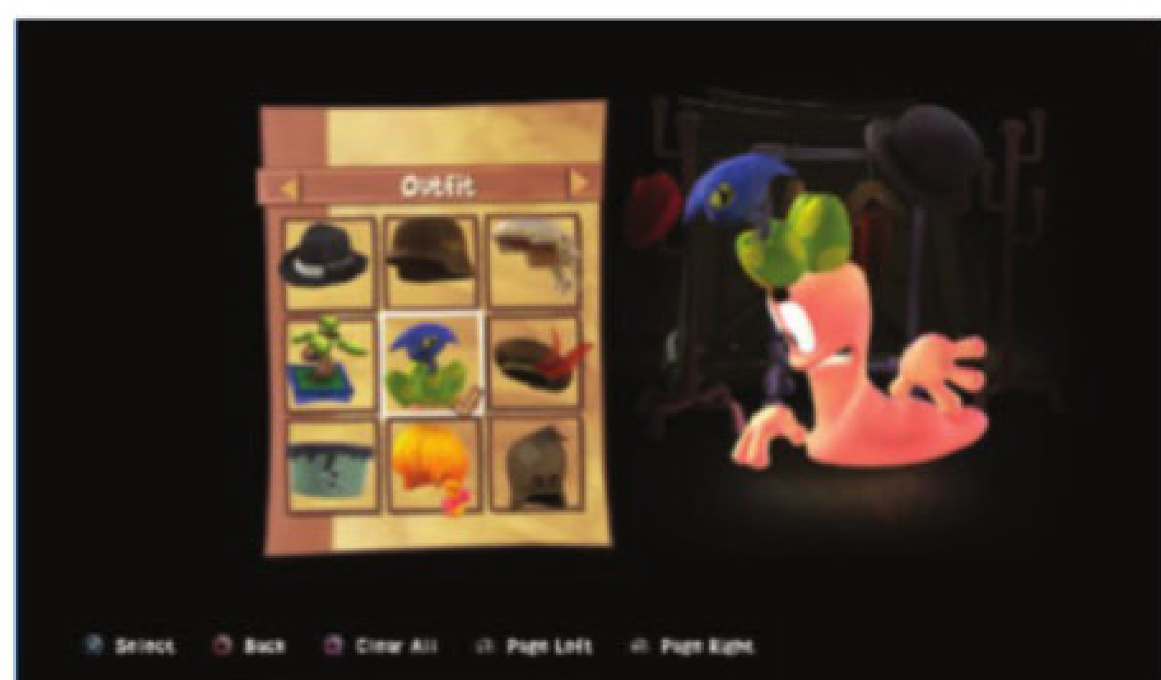
Apparent improvements to single-player modes such as physics-based contraptions 'make solo *Worms* much more fun' according to the PR spiel, but in reality, it's just as tedious as ever. Come on… if you're playing *Worms* alone, you're doing it wrong. It's okay, Team 17; single-player poker doesn't work either, but that doesn't make it a bad game.

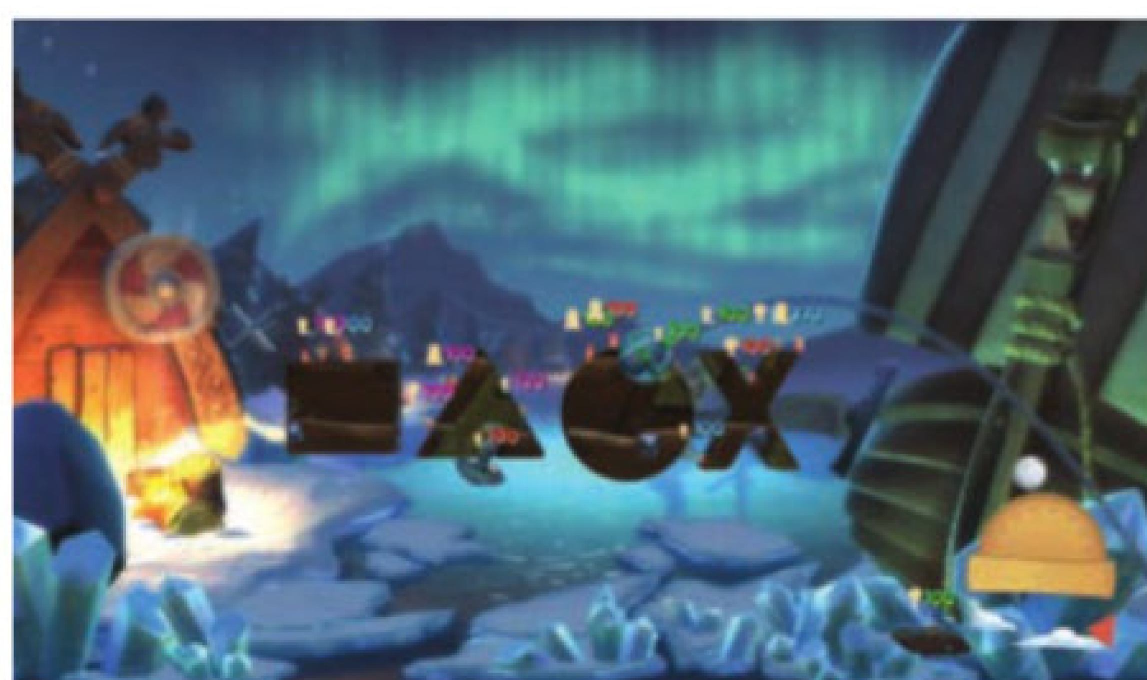
Battlegrounds' push towards online communities suggests that the team understands the player base far better than such bullet point nonsense would suggest, mind. This side of the game is ace too, allowing players to join forces and form clans to demonstrate their dominance over others. And if the game left less to chance, perhaps we'd be somewhat more ready to join their ranks.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A CAN OF… MENUS? As commendable as it is for Team 17 to have included so many different loadout variants, it might have been an idea to let you know *before* you play what each actually contains.





VERDICT 6/10
STILL GOOD, NO LONGER ESSENTIAL

BRINGING THE MIIVERSE TO LIFE

Tomodachi Life





Above: It's kind of fun to watch the Miis, formed by your own godly hand. Soon they take on a proper little life of their own, engaging with other Miis and having their own preferences for the other citizens around them. Also, yeah, you get to build awesome rollercoasters as well.

Back in the Nineties, Tamagotchis were all the rage. You would create your pet, love it, care for it, feed it, watch it grow and 48 hours later drop it down the back of the sofa, only to find it six months later and start all over again. *Tomodachi Life* hopes to tap back into that mindset of building and growing life from nothing.

Your role is to build up an island into a thriving, bustling community, packed with shops, restaurants and a host of characters who will interact, make friends, fall in love and, in time, have babies and continue the circle of *Tomodachi Life*.

The game kicks off with you creating your Mii. After designing the physical side, you have to construct its personality, deciding if you want it to be direct or caring, expressive or closed, energetic or relaxed. Your character is placed into a section of a personality map that will determine how it gets on with the other Miis you create. The process is an easy one and you can easily create a Mii in around five minutes.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: 2DS/3DS XL
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.86
RELEASE: 6 June (Japan: 18 April 2013/US: 6 June)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

THE SIMPSONS TAPPED OUT



AS GOOD AS

THE SIMS 3

The more Miis you make, the more things there are for you to do. A restaurant is the first to pop up, followed by a clothes shop, a pawn shop, a hat shop and then what is essentially IKEA – a shop selling instant room interiors.

Each Mii you create gets its own apartment, but they aren't shy about getting to know their neighbours. Your role as island overlord is to direct them into deciding how they will interact with their fellow island-dwellers and, although basic, you actually get excited when your first two Miis hit it off. Within about half an hour of playing the game, there are already four Miis, a sizeable town centre and a blossoming romance between two of the Miis who are extremely close together on the personality map.

Visually, the whole game is very basic, with stilted walking actions and not a vast amount of detail on the landscape but it does add to the charm of the game. As the characters level up, you can give them treats like phrases to use, songs to sing and new outfits. As the game progresses, you begin to learn more about the food the characters like, who gets on well with who and almost without knowing, you begin to care about the characters on your screen.

Gameplay-wise, you are pretty much led through it step-by-step, having to search around for the next thing you can do, which will unlock the next shop or level up your player, making it a lot less free and player-led than *The Sims*. It's not much more than an introduction to life-building sims, but it does that well. Try not to lose it down the side of the sofa.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

WII U It would be amazing to play this game on the Wii U to experience your island on the big screen
MULTIPLAYER The option to go and visit the islands of your friends would make the game that little bit more involving.

VERDICT 5/10
AN ENGAGING GAME FOR KIDS, BUT NO MORE THAN THAT

Below: Meet your friends for a coffee down at the local restaurant. Luckily, in *Tomodachi Life*, there's no awkward splitting of the bill. Unfortunately, that's because you always have to pay for everything.





Above: The beach is a popular hang out on your island. Well, when the AI decides you want to go there, that is.

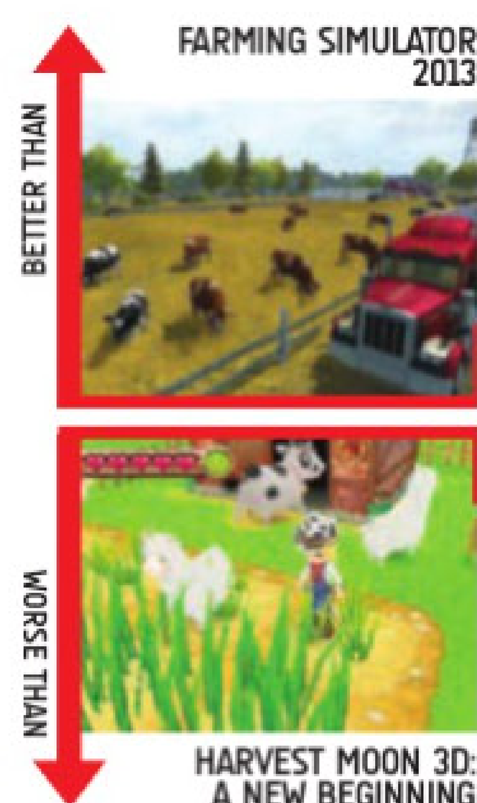
LIVING IN A GHOST TOWN

HomeTown Story

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
FORMAT: iOS (TBC 2014)
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Natsume/Rising Star Games (EU)
DEVELOPER: Toybox Inc
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: FARMING SIMULATOR 2013



WORSE THAN: HARVEST MOON 3D: A NEW BEGINNING

Harvest Moon **was never the fastest-moving series, but a sense of progression was always there, whether it was growing your crops or nurturing a blossoming romance.** But now, also from publisher Natsume, *HomeTown Story* makes *Harvest Moon* feel like a super slick action-packed thrill ride. There is no guidance beyond a very brief tutorial explaining how to run your inherited shop, so you are left to your own fumbling devices trying to scrape by every day. Sometimes the screen fades to black for a brief cutscene, leaving you expectantly waiting for the game to start in earnest. Only it doesn't. So you just keep working in the shop, waiting for something else to kick in.

But again, it doesn't, so you dare to venture beyond the shop. The village is large, though mostly empty, and the map is unwieldy. It also doesn't help that it's a slog to fight the obfuscating camera angles, turning a quick nip across town into a painful chore. Soon, you actually fear exploring, as this means you can't be attending the shop, serving those all important customers and earning cash. Not that the shop is particularly captivating anyway. It involves a lot of watching customers browse your items, only for them to march out the door without even glancing at your fairly priced selection of bread. Is this the life of a shopkeeper? At least real shopkeepers don't have to fight against clunky controls, where restocking the shelves takes three button presses too long, and when manoeuvring the furniture it suddenly feels like you're walking on custard.

To *HomeTown Story*'s credit, there is some inherent satisfaction in plopping down the most popular wares at inflated prices and watching the dollar roll in, especially once you find your first shop expansion and you can really start to rack up the transactions. Plus, if you're in the right mood, there is a surprising amount of appeal in wandering around the, admittedly very sparse, town. If you're lucky, a local will initiate a specific task for you to complete. These assignments are the closest you'll get to a purpose, and the dialogue you are rewarded with starts to give some insight to the mysterious lives behind the smiling faces of the villagers. Only after several hours of petty cash transactions do you finally see the characters develop at all, and the game's personality start to emerge.

With a little investment and plenty of time to commit, there are some hidden treats to find. However, with so many other places to get your small town/life sim fix, including the fantastic *Animal Crossing* and a litany of apps on mobile devices, it's hard to see why even the most ardent of players would stick with it for too long.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MONEY ON MY MIND It's all very well turning a healthy profit, but there's actually very little to spend it on besides more stock and a few shop expansions. The ability to fully invest in your house and town, with more options to splash out, would be greatly appreciated.

VERDICT 4/10
SHOWS SOME POTENTIAL, BUT ULTIMATELY UNINSPIRING

Below: There are some curious fruits to find for your store, you could procure some local produce from the nearby vendors, or, most excitingly, receive strongly worded 'requests' from villagers.





Above: Some of the sub plots are intriguing. If you can handle 20 hours of menial shop work, you'll discover touching stories like a mother abandoning her child due to money problems, or a crazy mayor obsessed with clocks.



CAN WE GET A REWIND?

Super Time Force

A playable paradox. That's basically what *Super Time Force* is – a game where you can send yourself from the past to save present day you who has died in the future. And with multiple characters all able to join this cycle as you see fit, you'll need to overclock your brain to even stand a chance of keeping up with what the hell is going on here.

The core mechanics are so very simple, too. This is a typical retro 2D shooter with 8-way fire, with the slight difference that you're able to bend space and time to your whim. At its most basic level, this means that you can rewind time upon death for another try, with the added benefit of having the deceased repeat their actions while you try to cheat fate. Die repeatedly on a tough enemy, for instance, and you'll eventually be able to chip your way through with legions of time-defying allies adding their firepower to yours.

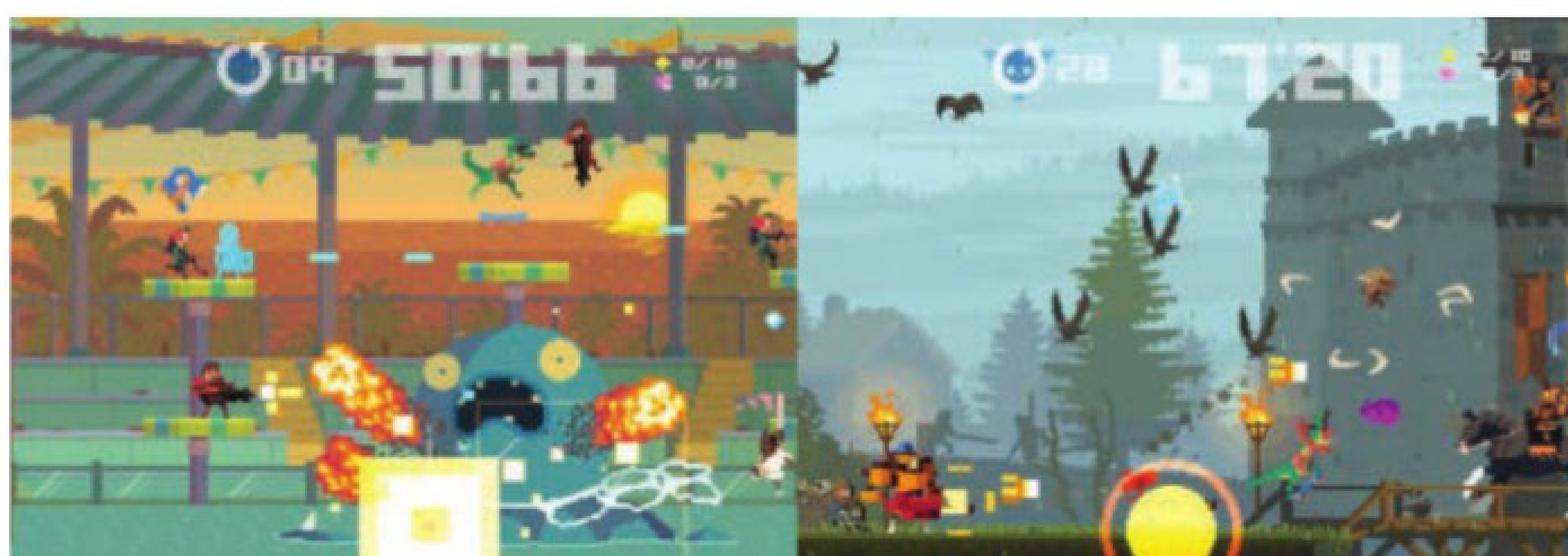
The same effect can be triggered manually with a tap of the Time Out button, and it's here that the potential for high level play emerges. Bosses can be flanked to hit multiple weak points at once; special attacks can be combined, dropping a shield with one character before hiding behind it with another to unleash hell; tricky collectibles can be mopped up easily by having one character blow up their hiding place before rewinding and sending another to wait and catch them. It's ingenious (if a little mind-melting at times) and within a few runs, you should be able to figure out how a particular boss or stage has been designed with this in mind. There's even a *Super Meat Boy* style replay at the end of each level, where every recorded run occurs at once – this is fascinating to watch and it's here that you'll often clock what you *should* have done with your science-dodging time powers.

The hardest part of getting your head around *Super Time Force* isn't working out how best to use rewinds, though – it's convincing a game-savvy brain that using them in the first place isn't cheating. Time manipulation like this is generally employed as a safety net and whether you're resetting a bungled hairpin or a foolhardy leap of faith, there's seldom a time that you'd trigger such a mechanic through choice when everything looks to be going alright. Watch some high-level *STF* replays, though, and you'll see how that mindset needs to change if you're to get the most out of the game. The rewind *can* still be used as a safety net, sure, but once you've perfectly planned a run and have a small army peppering a boss from all directions, it's pretty unlikely that you'll need saving at all.

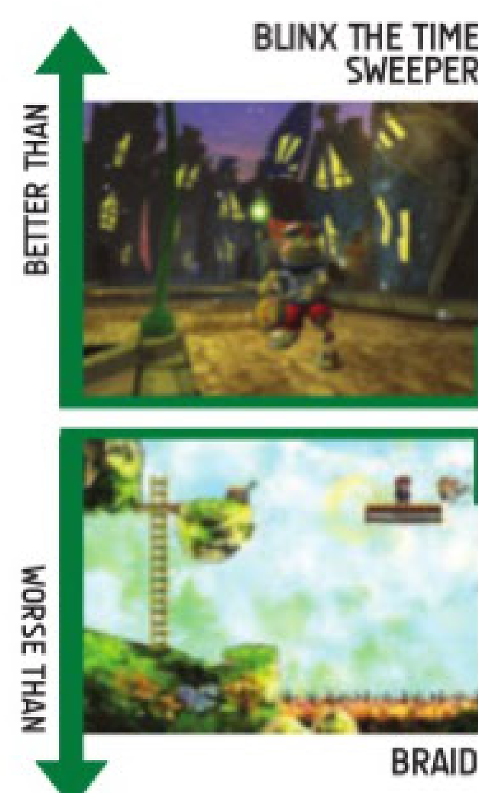
Super Time Force is a quirky mix of good, old-fashioned shooting fun, blended with more than a pinch of thinking power – but it proves to be a perfect combination.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Capybara Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The pun-heavy dialogue may be a little much for some. Still, it's not like you can't skip through it and dive straight back into the game…



BETTER THAN: BLINX THE TIME SWEEPER

WORSE THAN: BRAID

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TIME SWEEPER: Missing Blinx, more like. Who thought it would be a good idea to make a time-hopping Xbox exclusive without giving Artoon's time-sucking cat another chance to make a name for himself? Honestly, this industry…

VERDICT 8/10

MAKE TIME TO PLAY THIS





Above: Time periods (read: levels) can be tackled in any order you like. That doesn't mean that some aren't more demanding than others, though.

STILL CARRYING THE TORCH

République Episode 2: Metamorphosis

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not an enormous amount has changed since the release of *Episode 1* of this wonderful stealth project – but this is not to the second episode's detriment in any way. *République* remains such an interesting concept and still fulfils its primary remit of providing a triple-A quality console experience on a mobile device. Through blending truly competent stealth mechanics with some light puzzle elements, indie developer Camouflaj has taken this ambitious Kickstarter project and given it such an admirable and brilliant lease of life that it's a wonder the IP still remains safely in its hands.

Gameplay is much the same, with the player acting as a sort of overseer for Hope, *République*'s main character. By tapping an icon in the top-right of the screen, players can zip between different security feeds in order to direct Hope through Metamorphosis, a detainment facility nestled in a bleak, dystopian future.

Design remains excellent, with stealth mechanics in particular being a highlight, although we still find the touch controls themselves to be a little bit wobbly at times. It stands to reason, really, that *République* would be the perfect fit for the PS Vita, as the multiple functions available to Sony's handheld would only benefit the game further. The game is currently in development for PC and Mac, although moving to mouse and keyboard controls may detract from the (literally) hands-on appeal the game currently offers.

Episode 2 just feels a little more confident and a little more polished. The metroidvania dynamic means that players have to be switched on enough to be able to attempt different rooms from multiple angles, keeping the stealth aspect of the game feeling fresh every time you do so. When revisiting the first episode prior to this review, we paid close attention to areas that were inaccessible to us at the time, as by the end of the five-episode run we'd anticipate being able to revisit them.

It's worth mentioning that *République* is still among the very best you will see on the App Store. There's just so much here that makes it a real game and not some effervescent fancy that will distract you from life for a moment or two. This is a bona fide indie treat that is dressed up like a throwaway pleasure – Kickstarter backed, yet something that we could see one of the big guns spending money on.

It has all of the scope and style of a triple-A release but combined with the craftsmanship and pride that can only be found in the independent market. Couple that with graphics that could put a large proportion of iOS titles to shame, solid gameplay mechanics and a decent narrative hook, *République* will remain an interesting prospect in the mobile sector for the foreseeable future.

VERDICT 8/10
SETTLING INTO A COMPETENT AND INTRIGUING FORMULA

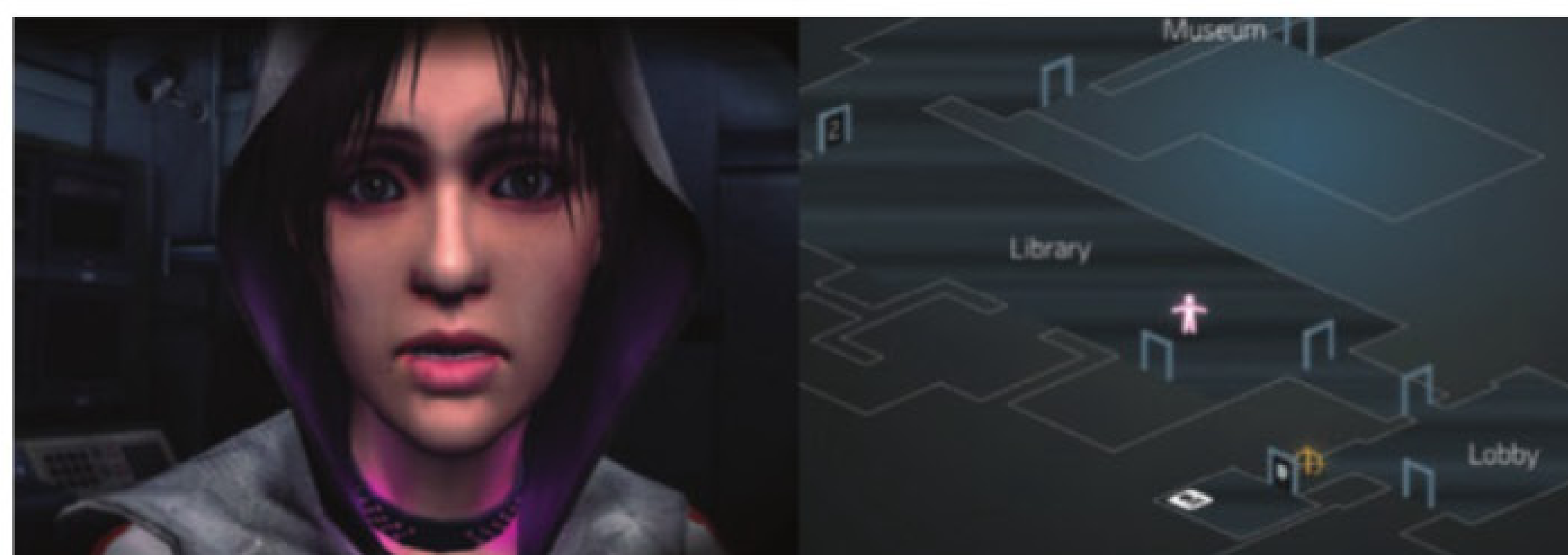
DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac (pending)
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Camouflaj
DEVELOPER: Camouflaj, Logan Games
PRICE: £2.99 (Season Pass £10.49)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

As well as introducing a new map, Camouflaj has also included a new variety of Prizrak sentry – one that doesn't follow a set path and also just so happens to be immune to Hope's taser.



Below: The new map aids greatly in allowing you to traverse the myriad different routes.



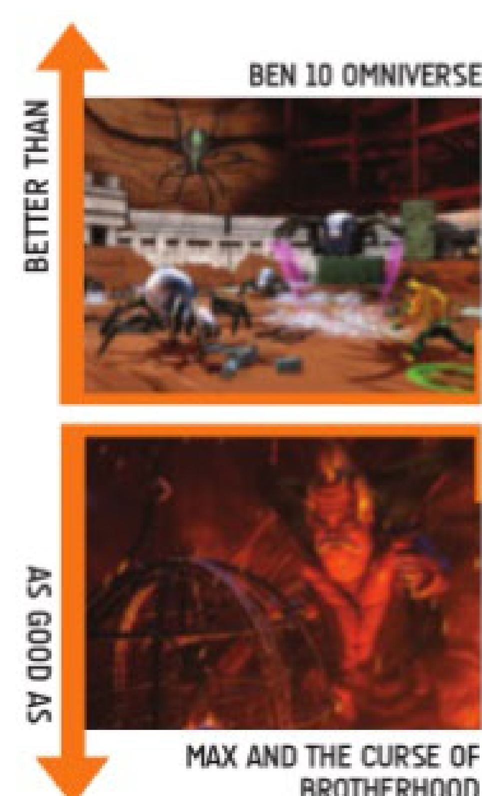
Above: Stealth is still very much the only option, although being captured only results in Hope being moved to a secure cell rather than dying – an elegant solution to alleviate any frustration.

AN ADVENTURE IN A DULUX FACTORY

The Last Tinker

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Unity Games
DEVELOPER: Mimimi Productions
PRICE: £15.29
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GB RAM Windows XP 32
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



If you have an aversion to bright colours, look away now. *The Last Tinker* is awash with visual excessiveness that would make the Mardi Gras festival look tame. Luckily, however, that is rather the point.

You play as Koru, a monkey-like creature who is revered around Tinkerworld for being incredible with his hands and able to make everything from clothes to repairing market stalls. Despite possessing these special talents, the ominous voiceover at the beginning, which explains the rift that has grown in Tinkerworld between the various colours that inhabit it, tells us that Koru could end up destroying the world.

Apocalyptic as it sounds, the gameplay couldn't be further from that setup. Koru meets up with his friend, a strange floating creature, who guides him towards this big race that seemingly has all of Tinkerworld talking. It is set up as a fairly restricted open world, with the ability to head off in many different directions, smash up some barrels and bump into some interesting characters, but always leading you in the general direction of the next challenge. There is virtually no tutorial at all, with Mimimi Games very much taking a 'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it' attitude to proceedings, which does work very well in allowing you to immerse yourself into the game right from the beginning.

Most of your time is spent travelling from place to place, learning the controls before being put through combat training – which was really rather fun – and a match-up with the game's bad guys. It looks fantastic and clearly a lot of work has gone into the visuals. Character movement is extremely well done and part of you does begin to believe that Tinkerworld could actually be out there somewhere.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EARLY ACTION Although we appreciate the need to help younger gamers get to grips with the controls, mini challenges along the way would have been nice.

There are more dead ends and pointless paths than is probably necessary and sometimes you do realise that you haven't actually done anything but run for a while, but when you finally discover that hidden vine to climb or set of stepping stones, it is very satisfying. The game does pick up in terms of action later on and the fight sequences come to involve a certain degree of skill and dexterity.

The story is a unique one as you attempt to reunite the warring factions of Tinkerworld – and although there is the occasional Disneyesque cliché thrown in, it isn't as sickly as it might have been.

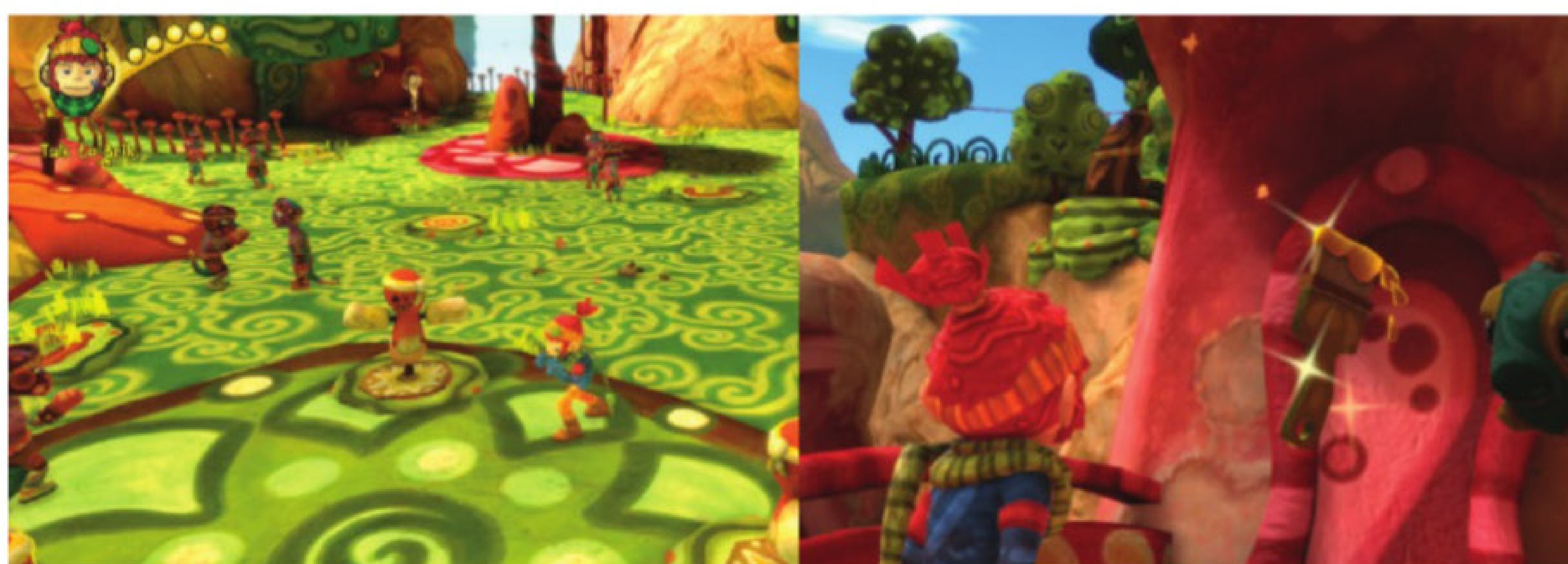
Essentially it is a kid's game, but there are four levels of difficulty, ranging from Child to Hard. This is very important, as it would be easy for new or experienced gamers to get annoyed with the standard of challenge. This way everyone can enjoy this charming game.

VERDICT 6/10
CHILDISH, BRIGHT AND GAUDY – BUT GREAT FUN!



Above: Paint brushes go for a fairly high price in the town so it's always worth having a snoop around to see what is lurking inside or behind a barrel.





Above: Training in the dojo was an early highlight. Those poor dummies never stood a chance.

“Everything I create and write, all of it is influenced by Half-Life”

TOMMY TORDSSON, MACHINE GAMES



WHY I ❤...

Half-Life

TOMMY TORDSSON, MACHINEGAMES

"The game that made me decide that I want to design and write games was Half-Life*, back in 1998. It feels like such a long time ago now, but I remember I was sitting in this cold student dorm room, and I had this amazing experience: I was in my own world, wrapped up, and when I sat back and it made me think 'You really can do exciting things in games'. From then on, to here, it's been in my mind – in everything I create and write, all of it is influenced by* Half-Life*."*

RETRO

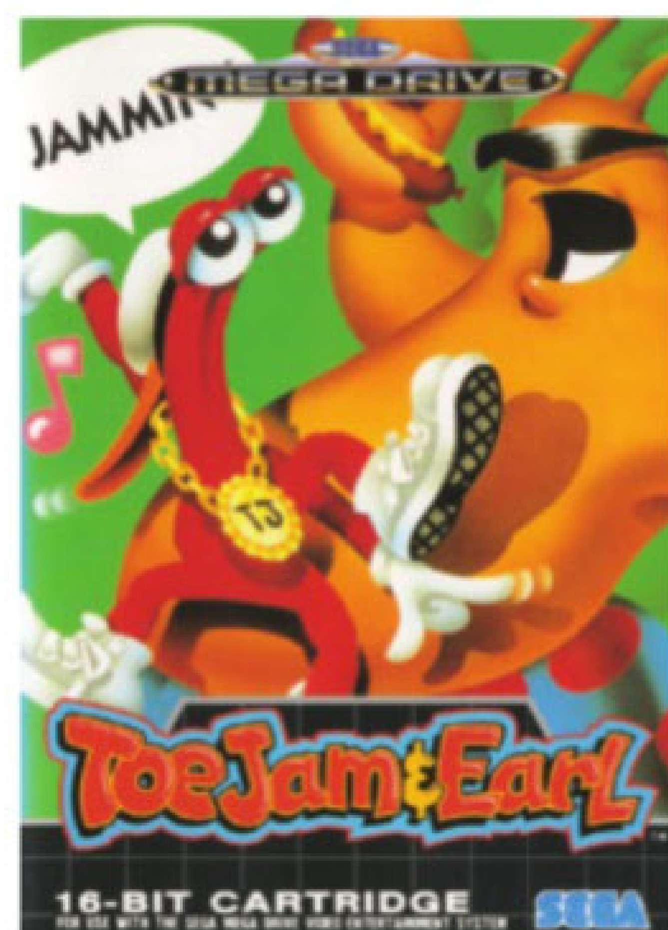
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BEHIND THE SCENES

TOEJAM & EARL

Of all the games inspired by Rogue, ToeJam & Earl was decidedly the odd one out. Join games™ for a look back at this cult hit



Released: 1991
Format: Mega Drive, XBLA, PSN, Virtual Console
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Johnson Voorsanger Productions

KEY STAFF
Designer – Greg Johnson
Programmer – Mark Voorsanger
Music composer – John Baker

When talking about individual influential games, *Rogue* must come high up on the list. While first-person shooters have shed the "*Doom* clone" description, the term "roguelike" is still used to describe a subset of role-playing games, and it's a subgenre with a rich history. If asked to name them, classical examples such as *Moria* and *NetHack* would come to mind quickly and followers of modern indie games could easily offer *FTL: Faster Than Light* and *Don't Starve*.

ToeJam & Earl, though definitely inspired by *Rogue*, would come rather further down the list of names most people would come up with. It's not hard to see why – to the casual observer, the unusual characters and setting are typical of Nineties mascot platform games and that route was explored by the game's sequel. Even for more seasoned observers, the game exhibits some very obvious departures from its inspiration. However, *ToeJam & Earl* was all about exploration, with randomly generated stages filled with enemies and packed with treasure.

It's a game born of the passions of the game's designer, Greg Johnson, who was a big fan of them. "Often we build the games that we want to play ourselves," says Johnson. "I have always loved games with random maps and randomly placed objects and characters. I remember I wanted that *Rogue* experience that I loved, but I wanted something faster paced and with more action. I love surprise, so that's what *TJ&E* became."

While *Rogue* is the only game that Johnson cites as an influence, he had ideas of his own to add to the formula, as he explains. "I also really wanted to make a game that would deliver a great two-player experience, as I like playing games with others." Johnson's decisions were not only focused on the end product, but the experience that would be had in making it. "Making a random two-player game is lots of fun because you can get a lot of enjoyment out of it while you're making it. Static level, single player games get old really fast."



The small sprites don't convey their characters as well as later games.

These influences, in the hands of other designers, could have produced a game which only differentiated itself from peers on a mechanical level. However, the team's love of humour would ensure that the game had a distinct character. "I don't think I've ever done anything very serious," Johnson offers. "*Starflight* and *Star Control* were both very light-hearted and silly games. I suppose it's true that *ToeJam & Earl* gets even a little more crazy though."

ToeJam and Earl stood out as characters, even as anthropomorphic animals were fast becoming the norm in character design terms. "I got the idea of aliens running away from crazy Earthlings," says Johnson of the origins of the characters. "I'm half African American and I love old school funk, so that also influenced the game's flavour," he continues. Alongside funk, the hip-hop culture that had emerged during the Eighties would prove to be a key influence.

The aliens were quintessentially Nineties in their designs. ToeJam's backwards baseball cap is the most obvious sign, but the trends of the time spill over into every aspect of characterisation, right down to the slang they use when they run across each other in-game. The intergalactic rappers gained their unusual names more by accident than design – programmer Mark Voorsanger has impaired hearing, leading him to mishear Johnson's intended names, *FlowJam & Whirl*, and add the names we know to the game. Sega loved them, and they stuck.

The plot saw ToeJam and Earl stranded on Earth following a crash-landing, with players tasked with finding the scattered pieces of their spaceship. They'd have to do so while escaping a bizarre set of Earthlings, including massive hamsters in balls, boogeymen and devils, and it's here that much of the game's humour is to be found. It's a classic gaming trope turned on its head – far from being a hostile invading force, ToeJam and Earl are laid-back aliens who desperately want to leave Earth and return to their home planet of Funkotron.

> **"I WANTED THAT *ROGUE* EXPERIENCE THAT I LOVED, BUT I WANTED SOMETHING FASTER PACED"**
> **GREG JOHNSON**

It's here that *ToeJam & Earl* is most different from its inspiration – not only is combat real-time, but generally discouraged. "*ToeJam & Earl* really was more about finding ways to evade enemies than to fight them – rose bushes, decoys, hi-tops, wings, teleporting doors," Johnson confirms. While the

EARL AND MYSELF ARE HIGHLY FUNKY ALIENS

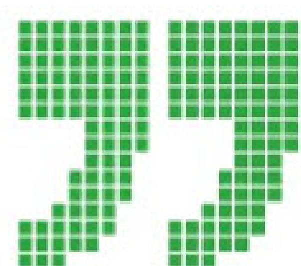


WHAT THEY SAID…



A most triumphant excursion of cerebral excellence. Dig?

Sega Pro, November 1991



characters did occasionally gain access to tomatoes that could be hurled at the hostile citizens of Earth, the evasive items that Johnson mentions greatly outnumber offensive options.

Just as *ToeJam & Earl* is not the first game that comes to mind when thinking of roguelikes, the Mega Drive – known in the USA as the Genesis – is not an obvious choice of platform. It's rather better known for its platform games and arcade conversions than slower-paced games of exploration. And though it seems a little odd with hindsight, at the time choosing Sega could have been perceived as a very bold move. Though the Mega Drive was faring better than its predecessor, these were the pre-*Sonic* days, when Nintendo was still unchallenged as the dominant force in the worldwide console market. Sega was still something of a minnow and hadn't yet developed a solid international presence – the company's US office still only employed roughly 20 people

For Johnson though, it was a question of corporate ethos rather than sales potential. "It seemed obvious at the time," he explains. "Sega was making interesting and unusual games back then. I think the Genesis was the right platform for *ToeJam & Earl*." Maintaining friendly relationships with third-party developers was one of the ways in which Sega sought to differentiate itself from its rival, and Johnson remembers good working relationships with the company. "The folks at Sega were great to work with. We had the best producers ever – Scott Berfield and later Bert Schroeder. They were both awesome."

"SOMETIMES I WISH I WASN'T SO DARNED QUIRKY AND JUST BUILT GAMES FOR THE MAINSTREAM"

GREG JOHNSON



While exploration is key, spaceship parts are not kept hidden – indeed, they're literally signposted.

ToeJam & Earl saw players taking control of one of the game's aliens to explore a series of stages, which took place across a collection of floating islands. While there was a fixed stage mode for players who enjoy memorisation and repetition, the game's primary mode randomly generated stages from pre-defined segments. It was an idea that Johnson and Voorsanger had presented to Sega with a selection of cards with level segments drawn on them, alongside mock screenshots. The islands weren't just connected horizontally by both hidden and visible pathways, but vertically – levels were stacked atop one another and accessed by an elevator. Falling from above can allow you to explore areas otherwise inaccessible, which was key as progression in the game's level system relied on exploration.

Not that it was anything so dull as a "level system" – ToeJam and Earl were never level 2, they started out as Weiners who eventually became Dudes and – if you were good – Funklords. A handy map provided players with the tools to chart their progress, and even if you'd found an elevator to exit the stage, it was often worth revealing more of the map in order to bring the next level a little closer.

Earthlings were the antagonists of the game. Their ranks comprised of both exaggerated caricatures of human society and bizarre, off the wall enemies. Lawnmower-wielding men and bees were among the most ordinary of the enemies, with others including a drill-crazy dentist and herds of nerds. More bizarre were the mailbox monster, the army of chickens and the phantom ice-cream van.

As well as searching for parts of their broken spaceship and avoiding Earthlings, ToeJam and Earl needed to seek presents, which would aid them in their search. Hi-top trainers could enhance speed, boomboxes distracted enemies and delicious junk food refilled health. Despite this not all items were beneficial, and you'd need to use them in order to identify them, or else find and pay the man in the carrot suit to do so on your behalf. Presents were also randomised at the start of each game, but could be spotted from their wrapping once identified.

While the Mega Drive was a powerful format for its time, the game wasn't without technical challenges. The game's design called for dynamic split-screen play, in which the screen would split and recombine when ToeJam and Earl drifted apart and reunited. To say that it was ambitious would be an understatement, as Sega had actually declared the effect to be impossible on the hardware. Reflecting on how the game may have played out without it, Johnson notes the decisions made in its sequel, which didn't feature it. "The two characters would push on the sides of the screen if they wanted to go opposite ways. Also if one of the characters fell off the screen they could teleport back on again." Johnson's preferred approach is clear, as he declares, "the split screen is way more fun."



Presents that haven't been used yet are represented with question marks, keeping the contents hidden.

"The split-screen feature was quite a challenge," recalls Johnson, "but quite honestly I never worried about the technical challenges too much because I had so much faith in my partner, Mark Voorsanger." Johnson's faith was well-placed, as Voorsanger managed to work out a way of implementing it. It was a challenge well worth overcoming, as the co-op mode proved to be the heart of the game. With two players, the personality that Johnson and Voorsanger had strived for came to the fore. ToeJam and Earl spoke to each other through on-screen text and could interact to the benefit of the players. Moving the duo close to one another allowed them to high-five, exchanging a little health to help the trailing player, and players could even donate a life to their dead partner to allow for continued



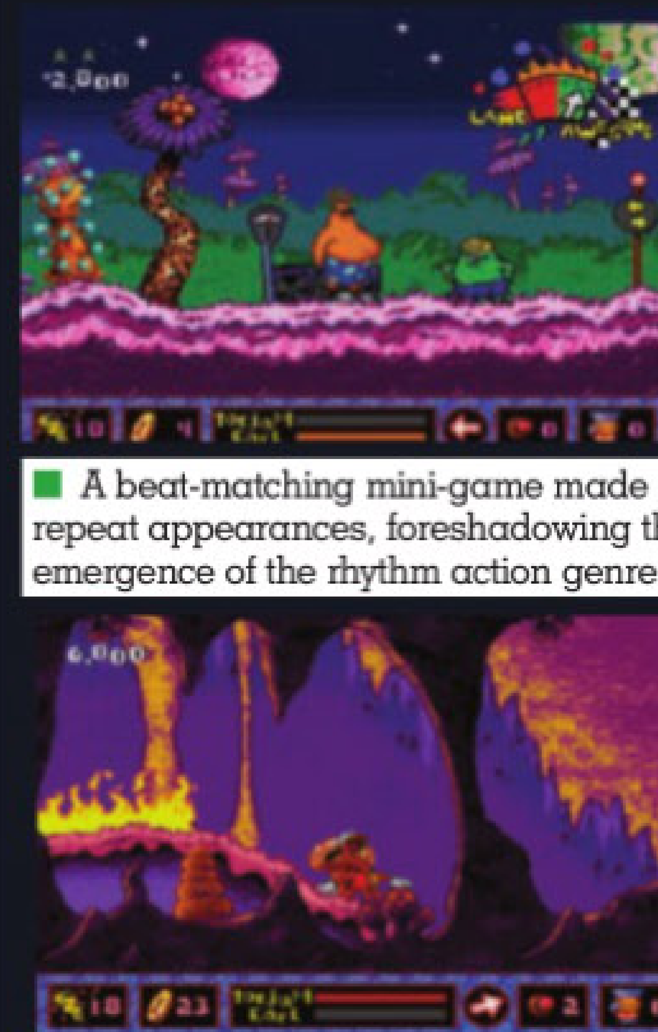
Differing types of terrain affected movement speed – roads speed the character up, while sand slows them down.

Sequel shock

ToeJam & Earl's sequel, *Panic On Funkotron*, was a drastic departure from the original game. Recast as typical platform game mascots, the duo returned to Funkotron following the events of the original game, only to find that they had brought a horde of Earthlings back with them. Having caused the problems, the aliens were required to capture the Earthlings and ship them back home.

In design terms, this meant searching for enemies in platform stages, pelting them with jars and taking them to the spaceship at the end of the stage. Seeking the exploration key to the original game, many of the Earthlings were hidden. The sequel was a good platform game and reviewed well, but has received retrospective criticism for abandoning the formula of the original game.

While he's proud of the sequel on its own merits, Greg Johnson has expressed his regret over the drastic change in style, feeling that it was too different to the first to connect with fans. "Stick to your guns if you believe in what you're making, even if your publisher doesn't."



A beat-matching mini-game made repeat appearances, foreshadowing the emergence of the rhythm action genre.

The improved graphics and large sprites helped players to connect with the game's characters and setting.

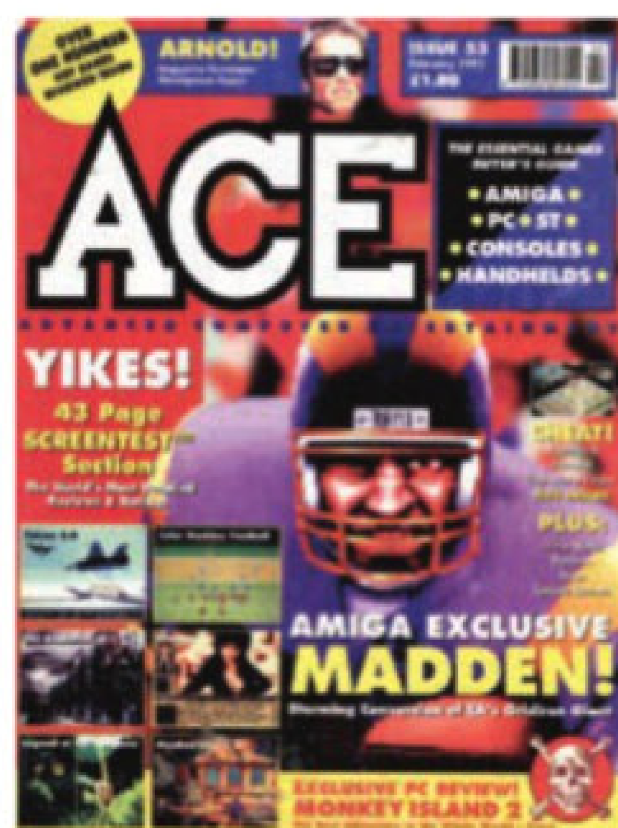
REVISITING THE FORMULA

■ Though the second *ToeJam & Earl* game was a straightforward mascot platform game, Johnson and Voorsanger were able to revisit the original game's design over a decade later in *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth.* Originally planned for the Dreamcast, Sega's collapse as a hardware manufacturer caused the game to move to Microsoft's Xbox. The original design seen in the leaked Dreamcast prototype was very close to being a 3D remake of *ToeJam & Earl*, with returning enemies and presents. Some new elements had been added, including a new female character called Latisha. "We added more ways you could fight back – you could shoot notes to funkify Earthlings, for example," adds Johnson. "I'd be interested to know what players really thought of the difference."

These elements of the game carried over to the final Xbox version of the game, but arrived alongside less welcome elements. "We were told by Visual Concepts (Sega's representatives) to model our game after *Donkey Kong 64*," Johnson explains. As a result, the game's progression structure was drastically changed from the original model, with linear progression removed in favour of hub worlds and key collection. Mini-games were also added, further removing the game from the original design. The result was a product which received only a lukewarm critical reception. With long-term fans put off by the new additions and newcomers generally baffled by the game, *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth* launched to underwhelming retail performance and became the final game in the series.

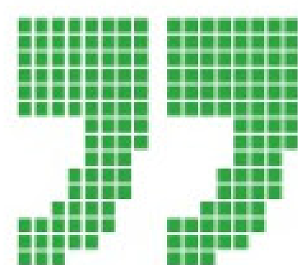


WHAT THEY SAID...



If Sega think this is what "Ver Kids" want, then they're sorely mistaken

ACE, February 1992





play. Better yet, the split-screen play enabled players total independence of movement, even allowing them to exist on different stages should one of them fall down.

Once the split-screen system had been worked out, work progressed relatively smoothly. "Pretty early in our development we got the game to a playable state," Johnson explains. "The two of us put many, many hours into playing it before it was released and that gave us lots of opportunity to tweak it and tune it." The tuning produced a refined game that contained a lot to like, but one which was by no means flawless.

"The game can be pretty darned frustrating at times," Johnson confesses. He's not overstating it. Some of the negative presents were among the most infuriating misfortunes to be inflicted upon players of any game. Summoning an Earthling was relatively mild, as compared to picking up the Total Bummer, which instantly killed your character and, if they were present on screen, your partner's character too. But perhaps the most frustrating of all was the Randomizer, an item which not only cleared all of your existing present identifications, but re-randomised the sprite associations. Johnson doesn't get tremendously hung up on the problems of the past, though. "Looking back there are still many things I would change, but heck, hindsight is always so terribly easy."

One thing that certainly wouldn't change is the game's music. As is to be expected from a game that takes so many cues from music culture, audio is a key part of the game's appeal. John Baker composed the game's theme tune, which became so iconic that it ended up being one of the few elements of the original game that was retained in its 1993 sequel. The soundtrack was of such importance that the Jam Out sound test mode was present on the main menu, as opposed to being buried in the options menu.

As development entered its late stages, the friendly relationship with Sega nearly resulted in much bigger things for ToeJam and Earl as characters. "Sega was actively searching for a mascot, or mascots. They needed something for their company branding," recalls Johnson. Sega had a variety of recognisable arcade hits under its belt, but its mascot Alex Kidd could never rake in cash like *Mario* did for Nintendo. For a brief time, it looked like the interstellar duo might take his place thanks to support from Sega's offices in the USA, but this never came to pass.



■ Mailbox monsters serve as hidden threats, as the game also includes regular, helpful mailboxes.

"We got pretty excited at the prospect, and the folks at Sega who supported the idea were genuine," Johnson explains. "Unfortunately, like most game companies that have their home base in Japan, it's really Japan that calls the shots, and *Sonic* came from a Japanese company and felt more Japanese. It may be that we never really had a shot, but we thought we did." It evidently stung a little – if you explore a little during that game's closing stroll around Funkotron, you'll meet an alien who remarks on the lack of hedgehogs in the area.

When *ToeJam & Earl* was released in 1991, it received a generally positive response. The game's sense of humour was appreciated and critics recognised the fact that the game offered a different experience to the majority of Mega Drive games. Aspects singled out for particular praise were the

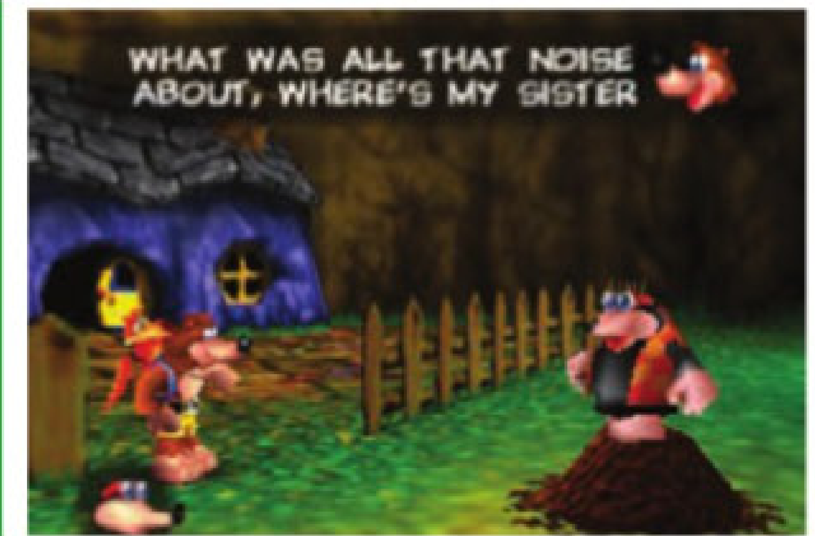
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Rogue > ToeJam & Earl > Banjo-Kazooie



Rogue's random generation of levels and exploratory gameplay surely had an influence on the creation of *ToeJam & Earl*.



Exploration and item collection heavily featured in many of Rare's N64 games, the tale of a bird and a bear included.



game's music and its dynamic split-screen co-op. "I'm surprised more people haven't done that since then," Johnson reflects. "I'm actually thinking of making another game with a dynamic split screen right now. It makes for a really great two-player, on-the-couch experience."

But while critical reception of *ToeJam & Earl* scored well on average, the game proved divisive, drawing particularly strong criticism from some reviewers. One of the most unfriendly reviews came from the magazine *ACE*, whose 1/5 review claimed that "Boring really doesn't quite sum up the toe-curling tedium of the whole debacle." Even the positive reviews included caveats for players who might find the game's offbeat nature off-putting.

"I have thought a lot about that over the years," Johnson tells us. "It's particularly relevant to me now because I recently released a game for Sony called *Doki Doki Universe*, and it had mixed reviews that were very similar to the reviews I got on *ToeJam & Earl*, long ago. I certainly could have taken a more straight and typical path to building a roguelike game. Another group did that shortly after *TJ&E* came out. Their game was called *Diablo* and they made piles and piles more money than we did." Indeed, *ToeJam & Earl* was not an immediate success and struggled to find an audience. Initial sales were very low, meaning that the game relied on word of mouth to build to its eventual cult success. With that outcome in mind, **Games™** was curious to know if Johnson would have chosen Blizzard's route if he was given the choice.

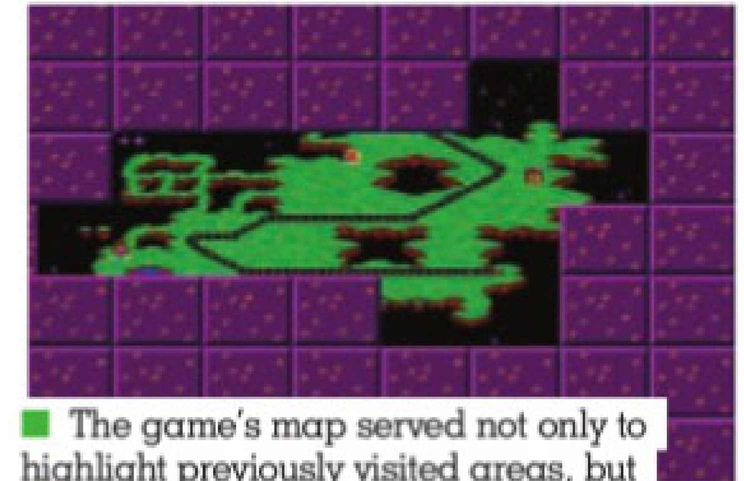
"Would I have changed places with them? Sometimes I wish that I wasn't so darned quirky and just built games for the mainstream," he concedes. "But then every time I start a new game, that feels too dry and too boring." It's a somewhat sad statement to hear, but Johnson's next statement is rather more reassuring. "Thankfully there are enough quirky people out there who appreciate something off the wall and different. I don't think I would change *ToeJam & Earl*."

Nevertheless, *ToeJam & Earl*'s struggles at retail caused a lack of enthusiasm for a straight sequel from Sega, which was concerned that it could not adequately sell the game. Work on this more traditional sequel was abandoned and *ToeJam & Earl: Panic On Funkotron* became a conventional mascot platform game, with only traces of the exploration-based action that defined its predecessor. Johnson and Voorsanger would not return to the original *ToeJam & Earl* formula until 2002's *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth*.

Johnson is still an active developer with HumaNature Studios and he continues to apply the lessons learned through his experience with *ToeJam & Earl*. "A really fun game can be built with just two people – you don't need a huge team," he advises. "Don't change the style of your sequels too much or you confuse your user base," he continues, in practical fashion. "Crank up the funky tunes while you work, and play test like crazy, then you'll end up with a game that's more fun to play," he concludes, providing the answer that seems most key to *ToeJam & Earl*'s appeal.



■ 10 parts of ToeJam and Earl's spaceship must be recovered for the game to be finally completed.



■ The game's map served not only to highlight previously visited areas, but potential places to gain points and level up.





■ Small snatches of dialogue appeared whenever ToeJam and Earl reconvened on the same screen.



■ Characters left alone for a small period of time will fall asleep, responding only after being woken with button-mashing.



BEST INTRO

ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODDYSEE

PLAYSTATION **1997**

"THIS IS RUPTURE FARMS," says a nasal voice, resigned and forlorn. A mournful and haunting soundtrack plays in the background as industrial machines rumble, bloody cuts of meat are torn apart, bonesaws cut at splintered ribs. Lines of Mudokons – the enslaved race of the protagonist, Abe – stand like automata, performing their tasks with resignation, some with mouths or eyes sewn shut. Abe explains the entrapment of his people under the capitalist Glukkon. Abe reflects on the delicious snacks Rupture Farms have created, before stumbling upon a secret that would turn his world upside-down forever – that the Glukkon intend to make Mudokons into a new line of savoury treat… The industrial and modern-gothic themes enacted by the striking intro to the *Oddworld* series set up the themes for what would become one of the PlayStation's most iconic (and hard as nails) series.


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INTERVIEW

MIKE LAMB

Tasked with cramming superior arcade machines into the 48k Spectrum, Mike Lamb enjoyed a spectacular career at Ocean before heading across the Atlantic to make his fortune. He took the time to tell us more…

Like many coders from the Eighties, Mike Lamb enjoyed a low-key beginning to his career. Computers were still in their infancy as he grew up in the north east of England where even the most modest machines were regarded as complex, something beyond the understanding of most people. One day, Mike's father returned from Hull University where he worked as a lecturer, laden with a Commodore PET; so began Mike's contact with gaming and coding culminating in his first commercial effort, *Pool* for CDS Microsystems. From this humble start he would go on to convert cutting-edge arcade machines Renegade and Combat School to the ZX Spectrum, as well as produce digitised versions of hit movies such as *Batman* and *Top Gun*, all with high levels of success. What is perhaps a little more unknown is what Mike did after Ocean; so let's get the whole story…

So your computing began with a Commodore PET?

My father brought home one to work on over Christmas and of course we mainly played *Space Invaders* on it. But I did get to do some BASIC programming as well, so I guess that was the start. I was maybe interested in coding because there were stories in the press about kids who made games and a fortune selling them. My friend's brother, William Wray, wrote a ZX81 version of *Space Invaders* for Artic and made a few hundred quid.

You soon moved on from the PET?

Along with my friends, I ordered a ZX Spectrum. Wray got an early one and wrote *Galaxians*. He made a boat-load of royalties and we all paid attention. But my first piece of software was called Spec Copy and it was a program designed to defeat early copy protection. I advertised mail order and I think I sold about a dozen copies!

This being 1982, how old were you then?

I was 18. In the meantime I had started University at Cambridge.

And soon you were making your first game…

There was a pool arcade game in the student union bar. When my exams were done I wrote a Spectrum version and sent it out to several publishers. Some of them offered me straight cash but I was more interested in a royalties-based deal. CDS came back with the best offer which worked well because their offices were in Doncaster, a short train ride from Hull.

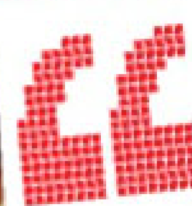
I KNEW PEOPLE IN MANCHESTER AND THOUGHT WORKING THERE WOULD BE A GOOD CHANGE

You quickly followed this up with a natural successor.

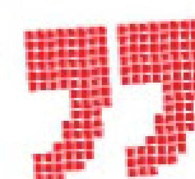
Steve Davis Snooker was CDS' idea after they saw the success of *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*. I remember being pissed off because Steve Davis ended up getting a bigger royalty than me but Giles Hunter [CDS boss] thought the sales would make up for it - he was right. I was making

DEVELOPER COMMENTS





Mike started at Ocean the same week as me and, like all the programmers at Ocean, he was definitely an eccentric. He wore a dark trench coat, had long hair and as a Cambridge student was obviously clever. We both shared the same ironic sense of humour and love of music so were always going to have great rapport. Work-wise, he was an exceptionally talented programmer and had a tremendous focus and application to whatever he was working on. He very seldom got stressed, but you knew when you were taxing his patience! I think his best games were *Robocop*, which was made in a hurry and exceptional, and *Target Renegade*, which is still extremely playable to this day. And like many of us, he was a creature of habit. In all the time we were at Ocean he went to the same sandwich shop, Melia's, and would always order tuna mayo with onions and a crazy amount of pepper. On white bread. Every day!



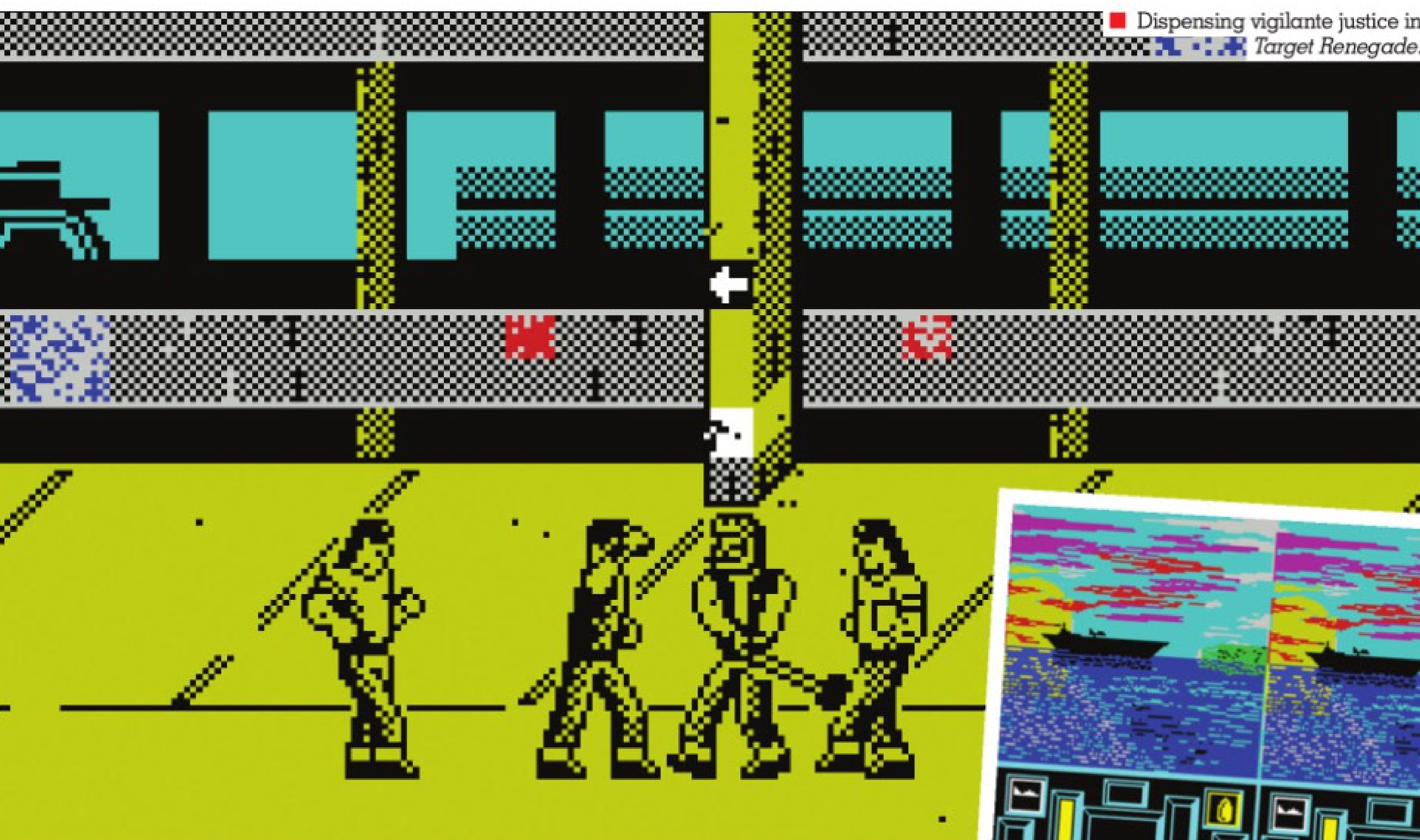
JOHN MEEGAN, FORMER COMMODORE 64 CODER AT OCEAN SOFTWARE



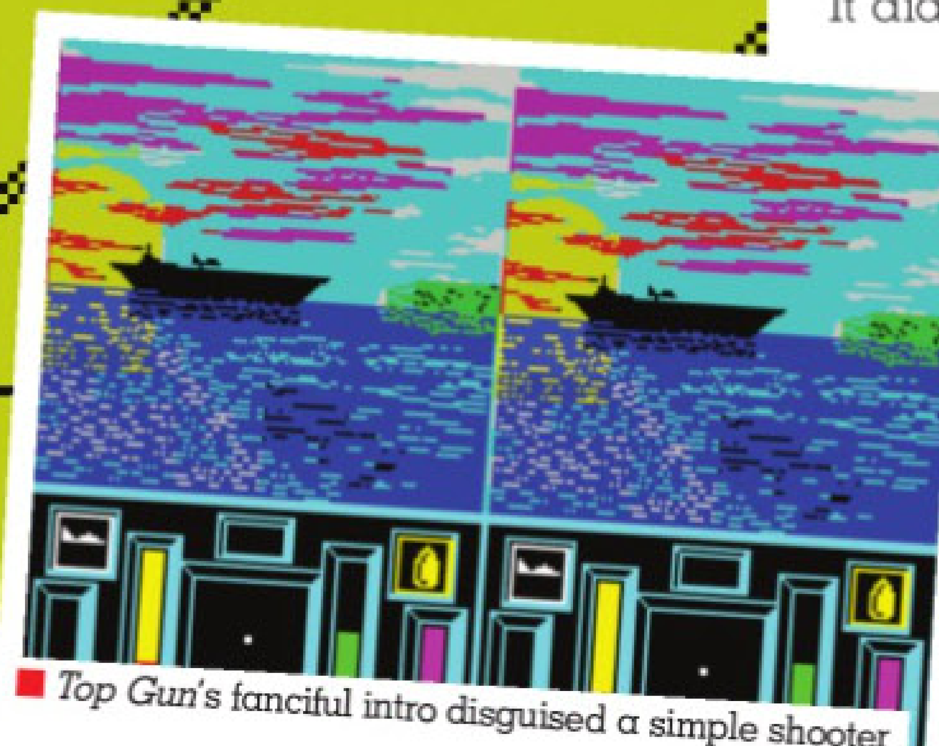
■ Performing a wheelie in *MTX Mototrax*.



■ A good clean fight, gentlemen, if you please.



Dispensing vigilante justice in *Target Renegade*.



Top Gun's fanciful intro disguised a simple shooter

more money than my dad from programming over the summer.

Which other games did you produce for CDS?
After the success of the Spectrum version of *Steve Davis Snooker* I wrote more Z80 versions for the Amstrad, MSX and Enterprise, each making steadily less in royalties. I was also a big fan of the arcade game *Joust* so did *Winged Warlords*. I did well enough that I didn't want to take a regular job when I graduated.

After graduating you moved back to Hull. What was your final project for CDS?
They asked me to write a golf simulation which didn't work out… I think it was overly ambitious. I started to find it a bit isolated as well. I was working from my flat and most of my school friends had moved away.

So you began looking for something else?
I knew people in Manchester and thought working there would be a good change. So I applied for a job at Ocean.

Who interviewed you?
Gary Bracey, who had just been hired himself! Previously he had run his own computer game shop and he'd sold a lot of copies of *Pool* and *Steve Davis Snooker*, so he offered me the job while pointing out that Ocean got the biggest licenses. The salary wasn't all that much but he promised bonuses if things worked out. Ocean had a reputation for the biggest licenses but not always the best quality and Gary had been hired to build up the in-house development team and improve quality. He hired around ten artists and programmers and most of us were new to Manchester, so we made friends quickly.



The simple yet playable and fun *Pool* published by CDS.

Is it true you were paid in cash?
To start off with. They paid us on Thursdays and for some reason there were always a lot of hungover workers on Friday…

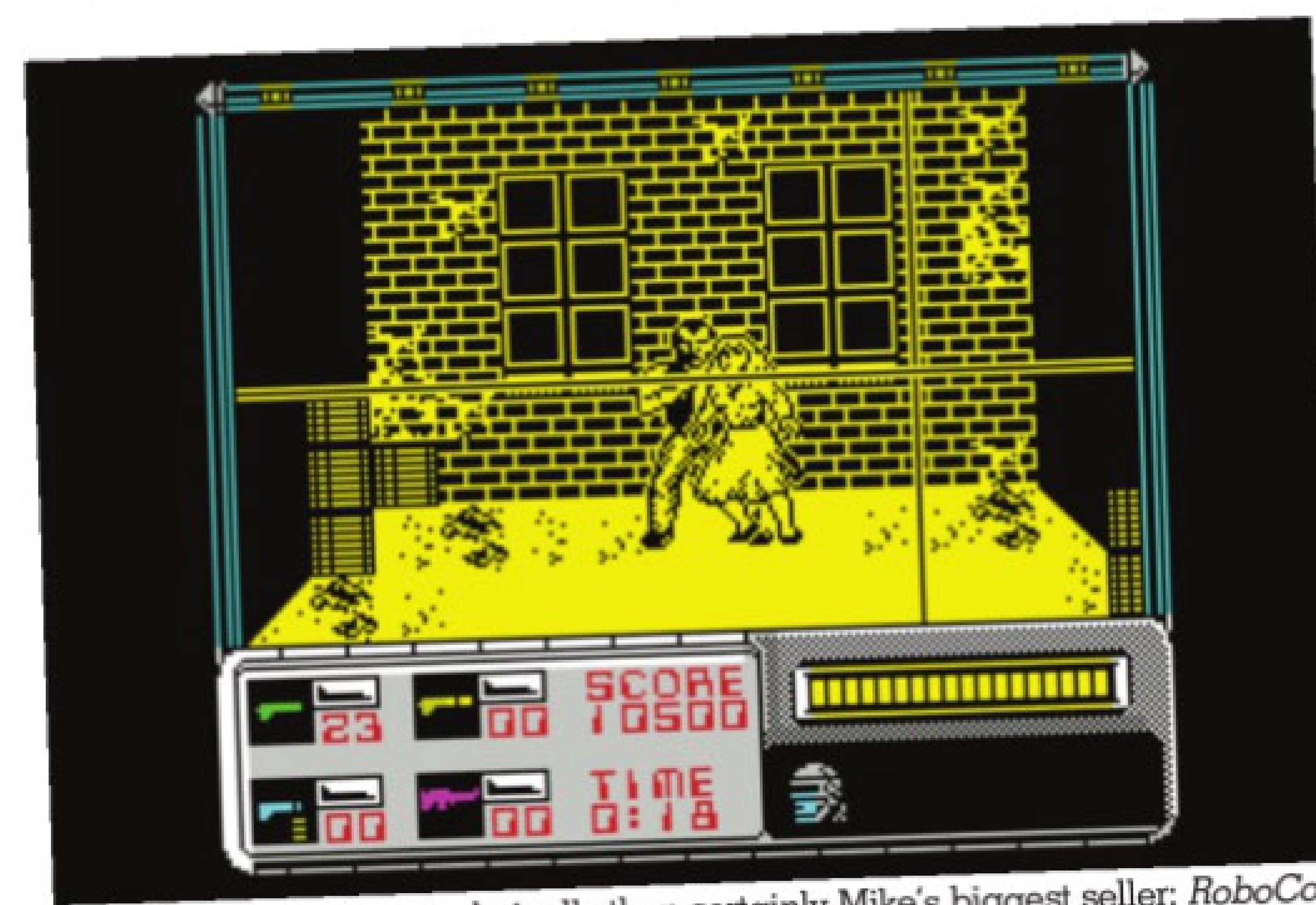
Who did you admire most at Ocean?
It was a mixed lot and most of the people Gary hired worked out and to his credit he got rid of the ones who didn't. But Jonathan Smith was a Spectrum legend. Someone told me how his scrolling worked in *Cobra* and I used it in *Arkanoid*, something he never failed to remind me of…

What was your first game for Ocean and what was the pressure like?
My first game was *Top Gun*. Ocean wanted a vector graphics game in time for Christmas which meant I had four months. It was quite promising to start with but it was a bit too ambitious. The end result was rushed and you had to work at the game to understand what was going on. I ended up doing most of the work on both the Spectrum and Amstrad versions. After that we had deadlines to meet, of course, but Gary mostly let us get on with it. He'd pop by every week or so and just check out what we were getting up to.

Your first official arcade conversion, *Arkanoid*, got a mixed reception.
I think that was in part due to the control method I used. The original game had an analogue control for the bat which let you slide very quickly. Rather than just move the bat left and right a fixed amount, I accelerated it if you held the key down. It did take some getting used to, but the testers at Ocean liked it.

There were no such problems with your next arcade conversion: *Renegade*. It was an excellent game and in some respects (such as the controls) it was mooted as superior to the original.
I'd learned from *Top Gun* that trying to do too much on the keyboard wasn't fun and the joysticks at the time often only had one button. Playing with a joystick and a keyboard wasn't much better, so I decided to simplify it to one attack button.

Perhaps your finest hour at Ocean was the sequel to *Renegade*, *Target Renegade*. Did working from scratch (there was no arcade sequel) make it easier or harder?
Ocean negotiated for the *Double Dragon* license from Taito but was beaten to it by Melbourne House. So we decided that we'd do a sequel to *Renegade* instead. We had the basic idea of what we wanted to do and overall it was easier to be able to add some stuff and not to have to try and convert other bits. Then there was this bug that caused the game to crash every two hours. It took a couple of weeks to find and actually helped the final game as it indirectly led me to spend more time improving the whole thing. I had also been quite worried because Ronnie Fowles [Ocean's artist on *Renegade*] had left but Dawn Drake did a really excellent job under all kinds of crazy limits.



If not his finest hour technically then certainly Mike's biggest seller: *RoboCop*

Another film licence, *Robocop*, was the biggest-selling game on your Ocean CV. What was this like to work on?
I just remember being really short of memory and time on *Robocop*. As a result I had to do things such as make random masks for the dying baddies where they basically dematerialised like they're being beamed up in *Star Trek*. It got criticised for being too tough but ironically the initial playtesting said the game was too easy - so we made it harder! I think once you work out the patterns of the enemies, it's actually a straightforward game.

You worked exclusively on licensed games for Ocean – do you wish you'd had more opportunity to design and code your own ideas?
I wanted to be successful and for most of my time that meant working with licenses. Take *Steve Davis Snooker* for example: it outsold *Pool* by five to one. Sure, there were often compromises with licensed material but it was still fun and creative. I suppose it would have been more fulfilling to be more independent but you make your choices.

You left Ocean in the early Nineties. What prompted you to leave?
I wanted to go to America. I'd watched *The Rockford Files* as a kid and when Malibu Games advertised, I applied and got the job.

At Malibu you wrote chiefly boxing simulations such as *Evander Holyfield Boxing*. Were you a fan of the sport?
Not really, but I became one while I was working on the games. I wasn't actually that happy to work on Evander Holyfield at the time; other people seemed to be working on much more appealing titles such as *Batman* or *Basketball*. But all the suits at Sega were convinced that Evander Holyfield would sell a lot and it ended up making more money than anything else at Malibu. As we were being paid royalties I got a decent enough cut.

Soon after you took the plunge and began your own production company: Left Field.
I'd met Jim Simmons [designer of the original *John Madden Football* and *NHL Hockey* games for Electronic Arts] and while I did quite nicely out of my boxing royalties, he was making a lot more money working for himself. Plus the games he was working on were franchises, so he didn't have to wonder what he was working on next. I talked to my artist Jeff Godfrey and we agreed to try and do the same and get a gig from Sega Sports. Unfortunately Sega was unwilling to trust a big license sport game to a start-up.

WE DID EXCITEBIKE FOR THE N64 WHICH MADE THE MOST IN ROYALTIES WHILE I WAS THERE

So what did Left Field end up working on?
We worked with Crystal Dynamics, making *Slam 'N' Jam Basketball* on the 3DO. 32-bit development needed a bigger team, so I hired John Brandwood [also ex-Ocean] and an additional artist. Unfortunately the game didn't sell well despite being well-reviewed, probably due to a combination of Crystal being unable to get an NBA license and the fact the 3DO never really took off.

Were there any other versions?
Yes, but we messed up the Saturn and PlayStation versions and by the time we completed them we were up against some heavy licensed titles.

You worked next on a licensed sports game of your own, based around basketball star Kobe Bryant.
Not strictly. We were able to get a basketball simulation working in 3D on the PC and we signed Bob Jacob [Mike's old boss from Malibu Games] as our agent.



Hopp dreams in Left Field's *NBA Courtside*.

He got us a gig with Nintendo and they were happy with the game and ended up making an investment in us in return for exclusivity with them. Nintendo decided to add Kobe Bryant at the last minute so he didn't actually have anything to do with developing the first game.

Did you get to meet Bryant?
Yes, and we did a couple of motion-capture sessions with him for the sequel. He was impressive – we hired a couple of top college players to get some routine animations but we saw Kobe was a lot sharper.

So Left Field became a Nintendo developer?
Yep. We did *Excitebike* for the N64 which made the most in royalties while I was there, the Kobe Bryant games and some Gameboy titles for Disney.

When did the relationship end?
After *Excitebike* we worked on a sequel for 1080 on the GameCube, although we were warned it would be tougher as Nintendo wanted it to be as revolutionary as the original. They weren't happy with what we were doing and eventually moved it to their in-house team in Seattle. Meantime, a lot of people working on the basketball games left to form Kush Games, effectively ending the relationship with Nintendo.

You ploughed on…
We rebuilt and ended up creating *MTX Mototrax* for Activision. We had high hopes they would buy us out as they had with a number of other studios, but their success with extreme sports was coming to an end and they didn't want to make a sequel. I was tired and didn't feel up to hunting around for another contract, so I sold out to my partners and, having saved enough up from various royalty payments, retired.

How do you look back at your time at the birth of an industry in the Eighties?
It was good to be a young person in a new industry. There was nobody who knew more than you and there was a lot of unexplored territory. Being at Ocean helped because there were other programmers to learn from. I miss the guys I worked with at Ocean. Particularly the Friday nights!



While not a fan of the sport, Mike was heavily involved with boxing games at Malibu.

GAME CHANGERS

SOULCALIBUR

Released: 1999 **Publisher:** Namco **Developer:** Namco **System:** Arcade, Dreamcast



Although 3D fighting games allowed players to side-step or roll, the 8-Way Run mechanic was the first time sustained movement was allowed in or out of the screen.

SoulCalibur was the second game in the Souls franchise but the first to introduce the 8-Way Run mechanic, innovating the 3D fighting game genre

AFTER RELEASING *SOUL Edge* – the first game in the *Souls* franchise – Namco was keen to listen to the feedback from hardcore fans that emptied their wallets into the various arcade machines attracting fighters around the world. The developer completely deconstructed the game and started to build it again from the ground up, working closely with the *Tekken* development team to craft a fighting game that focused much more on the nuances of animation and speed than its peers, yet still retained the technical complexity that the slower games had come to master.

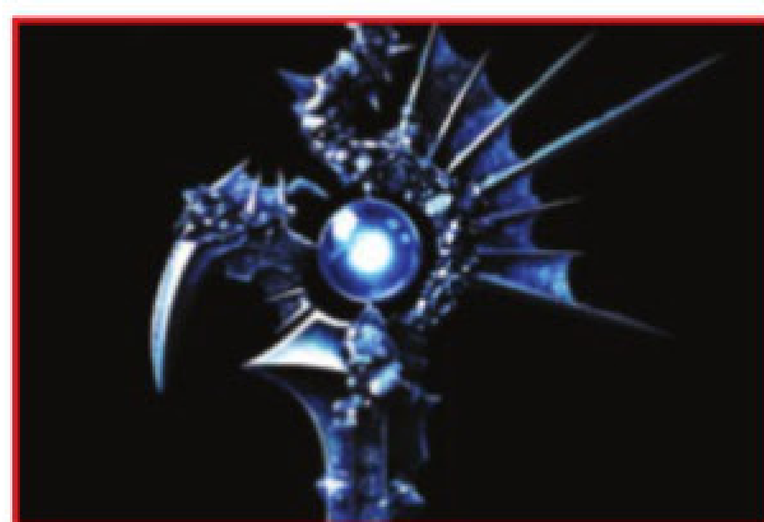
These changes were so significant that Namco decided to change the name of the game – *Soul Edge 2* would have insinuated more of the same, just a little more jazzed up – and so the now iconic *SoulCalibur* was born. The team at Namco responsible for the arcade release of the game consisted of about 60 staff, reduced to 40 for the Dreamcast port after the initial version had shipped.

It was the port the remaining 40 staff obsessed over that began to define the game – as a launch title for the Dreamcast (in Europe and America, at least), the game was the first arcade port to really highlight the difference between home-console releases and their cabinet-housed predecessors. *SoulCalibur* on the Dreamcast included a single-player campaign (which, until then, had been quite rare within the fighting game genre) and upgraded all of the game's stages to take advantage of the console's processor, rendering them in full 3D rather than the static 2D backgrounds players were use to seeing in the earlier release. The result was a game that felt completely different to its arcade counterpart, setting a trend for the other fighting games (both 2D and 3D) that were releasing around the same time.

SoulCalibur is largely famous for its seminal 8-Way Run feature – a movement mechanic that took full advantage of the game's 3D nature. 3D fighters had existed within the fighting genre before – *Tekken* and *Virtua Fighter* being the most notable – but it was the introduction of the 8-Way Run that really opened up the genre. *SoulCalibur* (and *Soul Edge* before it) were the only games – aside from the ill-fated *Battle Arena Toshinden* – that implemented weapons into their battle systems. Namco wanted to keep the weapons a central crux of the game for *SoulCalibur*,

MAKING HISTORY

SOULCALIBUR ACTUALLY DRAWS A FAIR AMOUNT FROM HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY… AND BRUCE LEE



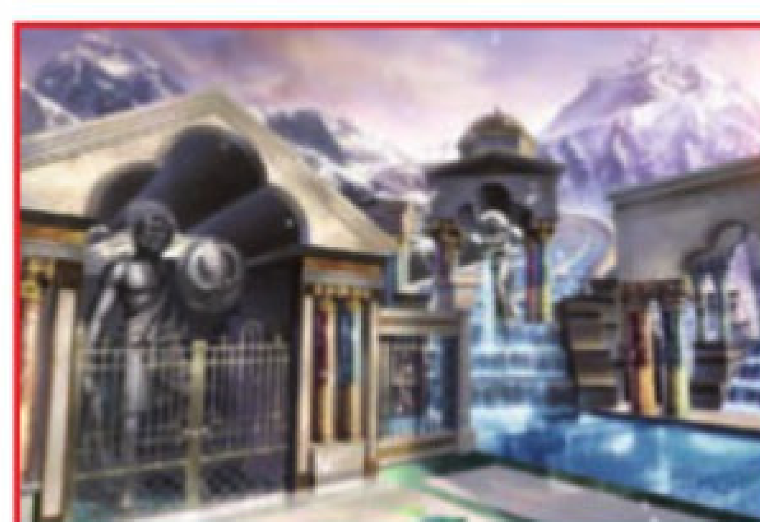
KING ARTHUR'S EXCALIBUR

★ The actual name of the *Soul Calibur* weapon is taken, in part, from the central sword of the Arthurian legend. As it turns out, both of these swords share rather similar traits: they are both holy weapons designed to vanquish evil and are wielded by brave paladins on quests of vengeance.



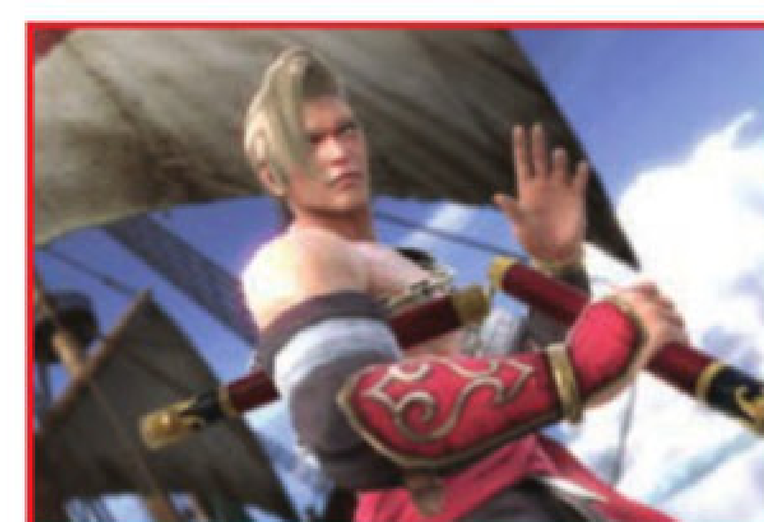
THE WORKS OF MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

★ Ghostly pirate and gunblade-user Cervantes is loosely based on the Spanish novelist of the same name. It's rumoured that Cervantes (in-game) is taken from the impressions left by the titular hero Don Quixote – the self-deceptive and doomed hero of Cervantes' first novel.



GREEK GODS

★ There's a strong basis in Greek mythology surrounding central character Sophitia, her sister Cassandra and – later – Pyrrha and Patrokolos. All of them are Holy-aligned, inspired by Greek god of the Forge and Fire, Hephaestus, who wants to destroy Soul Edge because, simply, he didn't make it. Ego of the Gods, eh?



BRUCE LEE

★ Maxi – a wandering pirate trained in the arts of nunchaku – is another in a long line of fighting game characters that has been not just inspired by but actually based on the famous Chinese movie star; fitting in line with *Tekken*'s Law, *Mortal Kombat*'s Liu Kang, *Street Fighter*'s Fei Long and *Dead Or Alive*'s Jann Lee.

so the 'Weapon Break' of *Soul Edge* was taken out. The combination of permanent weapon combat and the 8-Way Run made *SoulCalibur* one of the most tactile games on the market; the ability to position yourself at will around your opponent went hand-in-hand with extended reach and varied movepool weapons allowed to each character.

By having each character fight with different types of weapon, Namco also opened up a whole realm of possibilities for interesting and diverse move-set designs. From the bushido-inspired sheathing and drawing attacks of Mitsurugi to Ivy's enchanted and alchemical whip-sword, *SoulCalibur* afforded itself freedom to include characters that other franchises could only dream about. This means that where games such as *Tekken* or *Street Fighter* or *King Of Fighters* would see palette-swapped characters or perhaps an overlap in moveset, *SoulCalibur* stood alone as being the only fighter game with a truly unique cast of characters.

Myriad fighters with myriad fighting styles meant there was more of a focus on defence in *SoulCalibur* than in other fighters, too. The jump mechanic from *Soul Edge* was nerfed for *SoulCalibur*, becoming little more than a hop, so defensive play became less about evasion and more about the active block that was mapped to one of the face buttons – a curio in fighting games of the time. Having to actively choose when to block rendered you stationary, your only defensive flexibility coming from the Guard Impact mechanic – a staggering parry that could be triggered by pressing guard/forward. Having a longer window to pull off your Impacts moved the *Soul* series away from the rock-paper-scissors paradigm that *Edge* set up and made the whole fighting system seem much more rhythmic and balanced.

NAMCO OPENED UP A WHOLE REALM OF POSSIBILITIES FOR INTERESTING AND DIVERSE MOVE-SET DESIGNS

KEY FACTS

- The 8-Way Run system came from a Namco demo that featured a character running free through a field. The *Soul* devs used it and found it made a perfect marriage with weapon-based combat.
- *SoulCalibur* is the only *Soul* game not to appear on a PlayStation system of any kind.
- Across all the series' entries, the game has sold over 13 million units.
- Many critics cite *SoulCalibur* as the most important game on the Dreamcast – toting it as a system seller due to how it showed off the graphical capabilities of the hardware.

■■■ The medieval fantasy setting of the game was also in contrast to *SoulCalibur*'s more modern peers. Moving between feudal Japan, the imposing castles of Germany, Indian docks and Caribbean caves – all rendered in 3D – allowed the game's diverse roster a fitting variety of locales. With the single-player campaign hashing out the foundations of a sprawling narrative that would live for six more games and two spin-offs (and counting), *SoulCalibur*'s console release proved that there was a huge market for fighting games on the home console, and established Namco as the leading force in 3D fighters for generations to come.







GAME CHANGERS

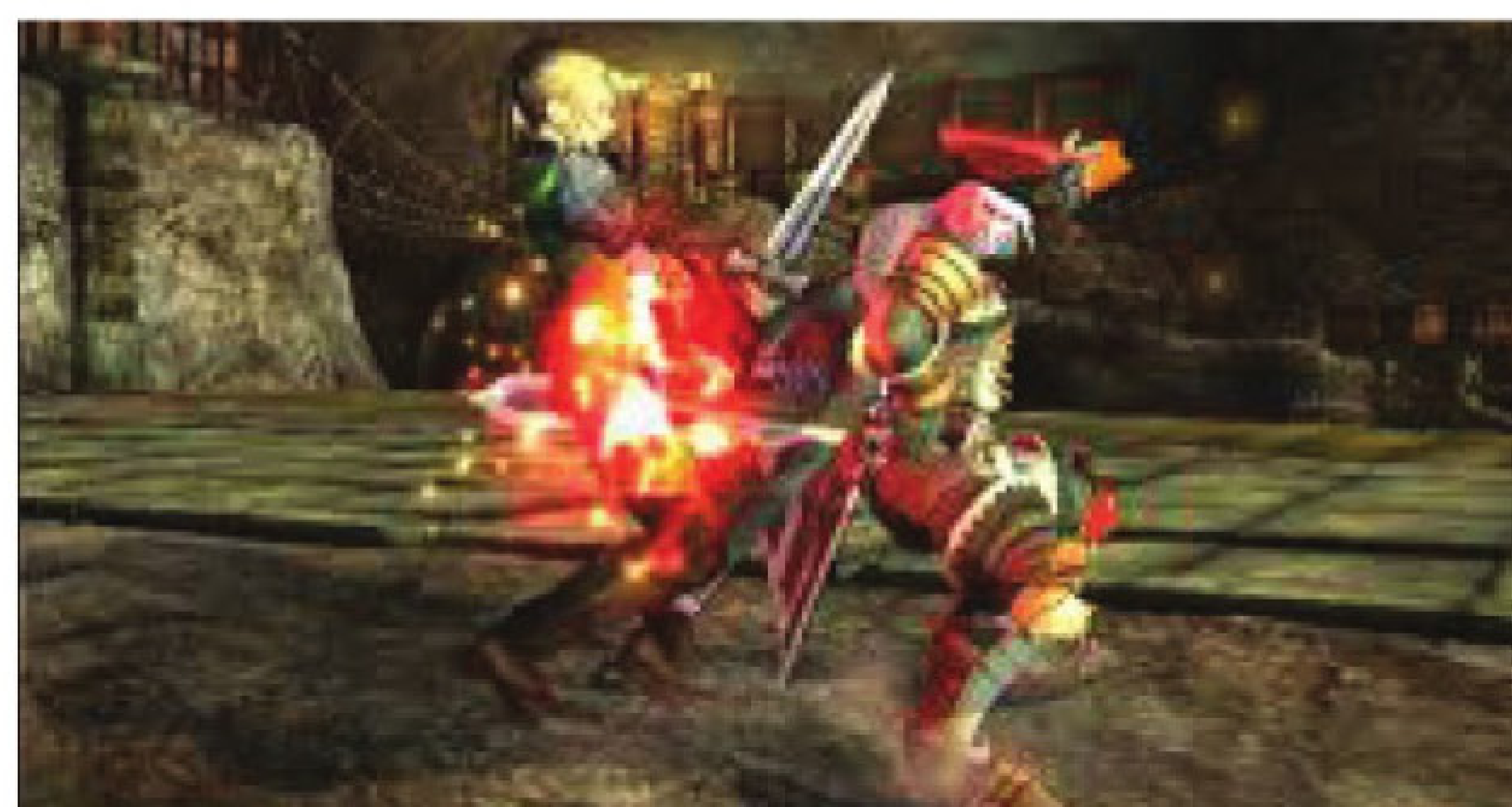
THE 10 STRANGEST SOULCALIBUR MOMENTS

SOULCALIBUR HAS HAD SOME TRULY OFF-THE-WALL MOMENTS. FROM BIZARRE CROSS-OVERS TO CRAZY GLITCHES, HERE ARE THE TOP 10 MOST ODD THINGS WE'VE ENCOUNTERED



LIGHTSABER BATTLES IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE (SOULCALIBUR IV)

IT'S ODD SEEING the guest characters *SoulCalibur* brings in matched up against recurring characters and seeing them fight in hilarious locations. With *SoulCalibur IV*, Yoda, Darth Vader and the horrifically named Starkiller were all added to the roster, allowing amazing Force battles in broken castles and floating platforms.



THE WEIRD TRANSLATION IN SOULCALIBUR II (SOULCALIBUR II)

IN THE ENGLISH version of *SoulCalibur II*, Cervantes and Ivy's destined battle opens with the pirate father saying "Come back to me, my child." Nothing too weird about that. In Japanese, though, Cervantes says "Return to me the soul I have allowed you," which is like a patriarchal power trip you'd find in a Victorian gothic novel.



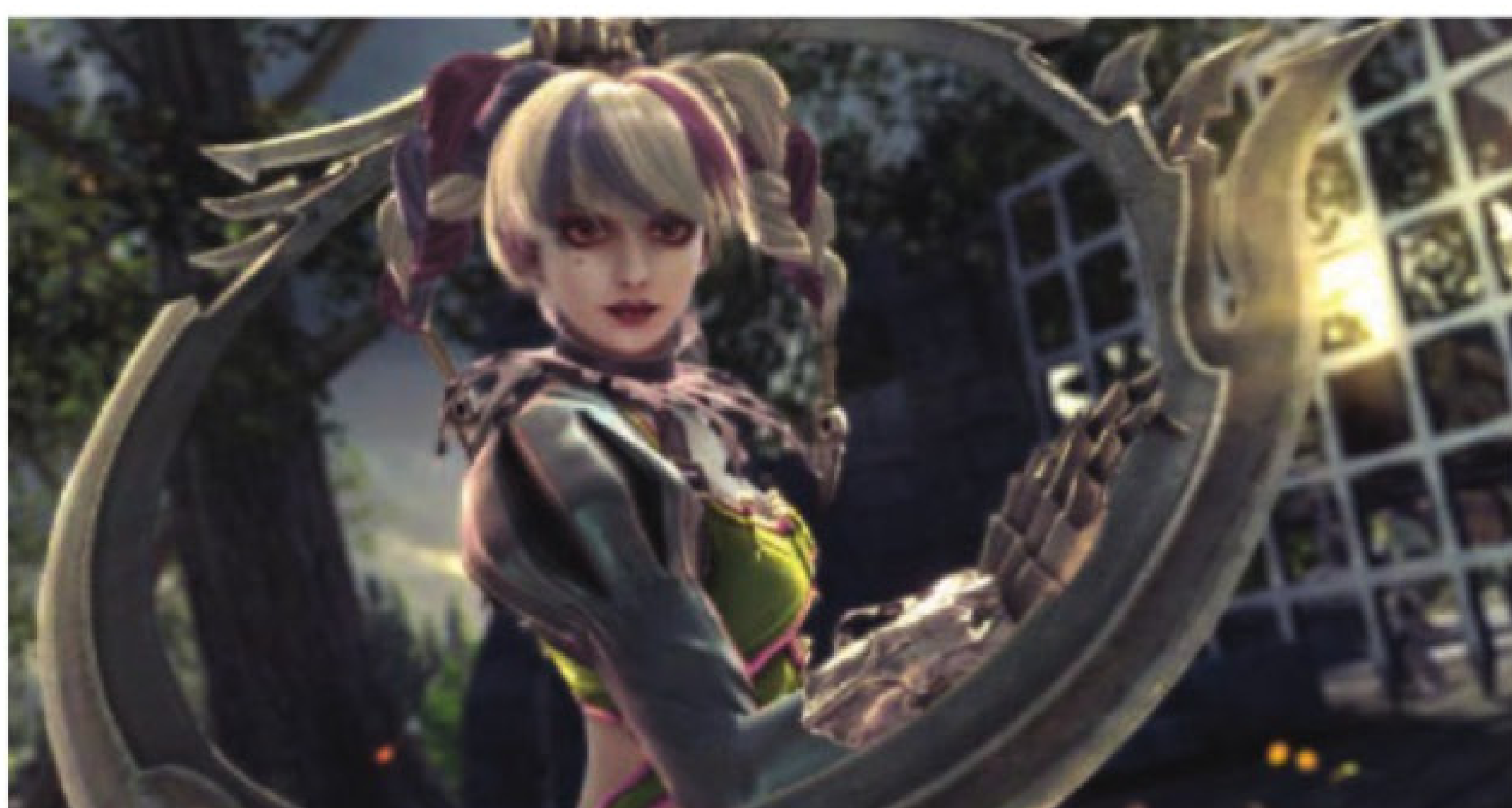
FIGHTING ENEMIES WITH A REAL-LIFE FISHING ROD (SOULCALIBUR)

THE DREAMCAST HAD a range of forward-thinking but useless peripherals. One of the more intriguing uses of the various Sega hardware was the motion-sensing fishing rod that could be swung around in front of your TV to simulate attacks. Just don't try doing this when playing as kunai-wielder Taki…



VOLDO (SOUL EDGE)

SEEMINGLY A BLIND, mute and deaf slave that was horrifically abused by his merchant master, Voldo somehow manages to defend his (now) dead master's money pit despite all of these physical handicaps. His penchant for bondage gear and ridiculous codpieces makes him iconic, but we think potentially for all the wrong reasons.



MAKING BIPOLAR DISORDER A MECHANIC (SOULCALIBUR III)

■ TIRA IS NOTABLE for two reasons: first, her costumes are infamous for their lack of coverage on her bosom. Second, her attacks change depending on her mood. Labelled Jolly and Gloomy, Tira's two states randomly switch, with gloomy attacks inflicting self-harm as an exchange for more damage to enemies.



HAVING AN ALIEN BATTLE FOR THE SOULS OF HUMANS (SOULCALIBUR II)

■ NECRID IS A WEIRD character that has only appeared in *SoulCalibur II*, designed by Todd McFarlane – the creator of Spawn (who also appeared in the Xbox version). Necrid had little to no backstory, no motive and no weapon. He just seemed like a filler character in the game after *Soul Edge* because… why not?



THE GENTLEMAN TROLL (SOULCALIBUR: BROKEN DESTINY)

■ FIRST APPEARING IN the PSP spin-off *Broken Destiny*, Dampierre was supposed to be a con-artist, but ended up being an international war criminal instead. He is the *SoulCalibur* troll character by default now, fighting with two hidden blades and throwing himself all over the stage – *incredibly* irritating to fight.



YOU CAN'T TRUST PEOPLE WITH CUSTOM CONTENT (SOULCALIBUR V)

■ THE CREATE-A-SOUL mode in *SoulCalibur V* allowed you freedom to create your own characters with a fighting style based on that of a pre-existing character. Thing is, when the general population got hold of this, the only players you'd fight online would have huge phallic attachments fixed to their crotches. Nice.



HARADA'S CAMEOS (SOULCALIBUR V)

■ KATSUHIRO HARADA – THE creative force driving heading up the *Tekken* series and working also on *Project Soul* – is renowned for his sense of humour and zany approach to game-making. The best manifestation of this is in *SoulCalibur V*, where he is a playable character, fighting with Heihachi's Mishima-karate style. We're a fan of fourth-wall breaking – and this does it well.



FIGHTING IN THE NUDE (SOUCALIBUR IV)

■ *SOULCALIBUR IV* INTRODUCED a mechanic designed to debuff the benefits of constant blocking – the Soul Gauge. If you continued to block hit upon hit, your Gauge would deplete, rendering you in a Soul Crush: a fancy term for breaking your clothes off. This was a popular feature with – let's just say – a certain kind of player.



THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

BOMBERMAN

Join games™ as we look back at Bomberman's chequered career and reveal the highs and lows of this popular and enduring series

NOWADAYS THE *BOMBERMAN* franchise is best known for its chaotic multiplayer mode that sees players desperately trying to blow each other up in order to achieve victory. It was oh-so-different in *Bomberman*'s early days however, with the titular hero simply confined to walking around mazes and blowing up walls and balloons. Despite this lowly beginning, *Bomberman* grew in popularity and went on to become Hudson Soft's biggest franchise – and the iconic hero soon found himself being shoehorned into all sorts of different genres. Hudson Soft itself is now no more, having been absorbed by Konami in 2012, with the last official game being released in 2011. With over 70 games released across the main series, spin-offs and mobile phones it would be absolutely impossible to cover all of them across eight pages, so we'll be focusing on the best and worst moments of the classic franchise.

BAKUDAN OTOKO 1983

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

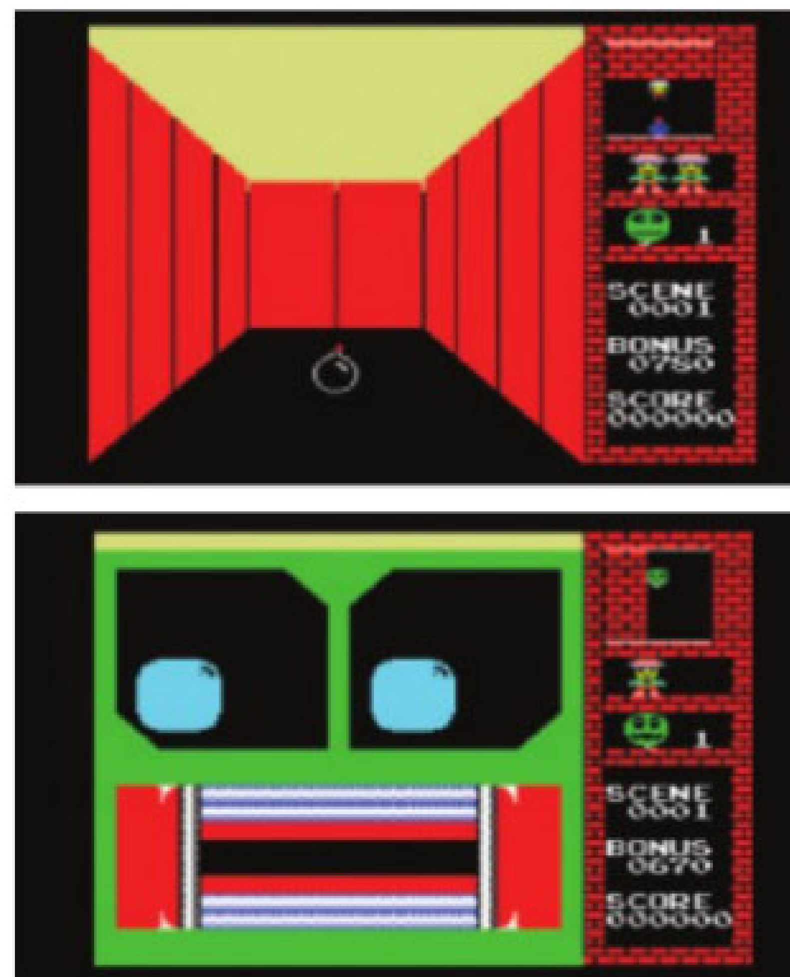
The story of *Bomberman* begins in 1983. Hudson Soft released its quirky little game on a variety of home computers in Japan, including the popular MSX, NEC PC-8801 and Sharp MZ-700. It also released the game in Europe for the MSX and ZX Spectrum. Interestingly, it was known on the Spectrum as *Eric And The Floaters*, which makes it sound like some amazing band from the Sixties and not a game about wanton destruction. As Erik/Bomberman you navigated the single-screen mazes, finding a way to take out each stage's enemies (known as Floaters in the Spectrum version). You did this by dropping a bomb and hoping your opponent will get caught in the resulting blast. Simples. Walls can also be blown up by your bombs, adding a nice level of strategy to the game as you attempt to take out your foes and use different tactics (although you can't block them off like in later games, as they pass right through bombs). An interesting start for the series, but a far better version of the game was just around the corner.

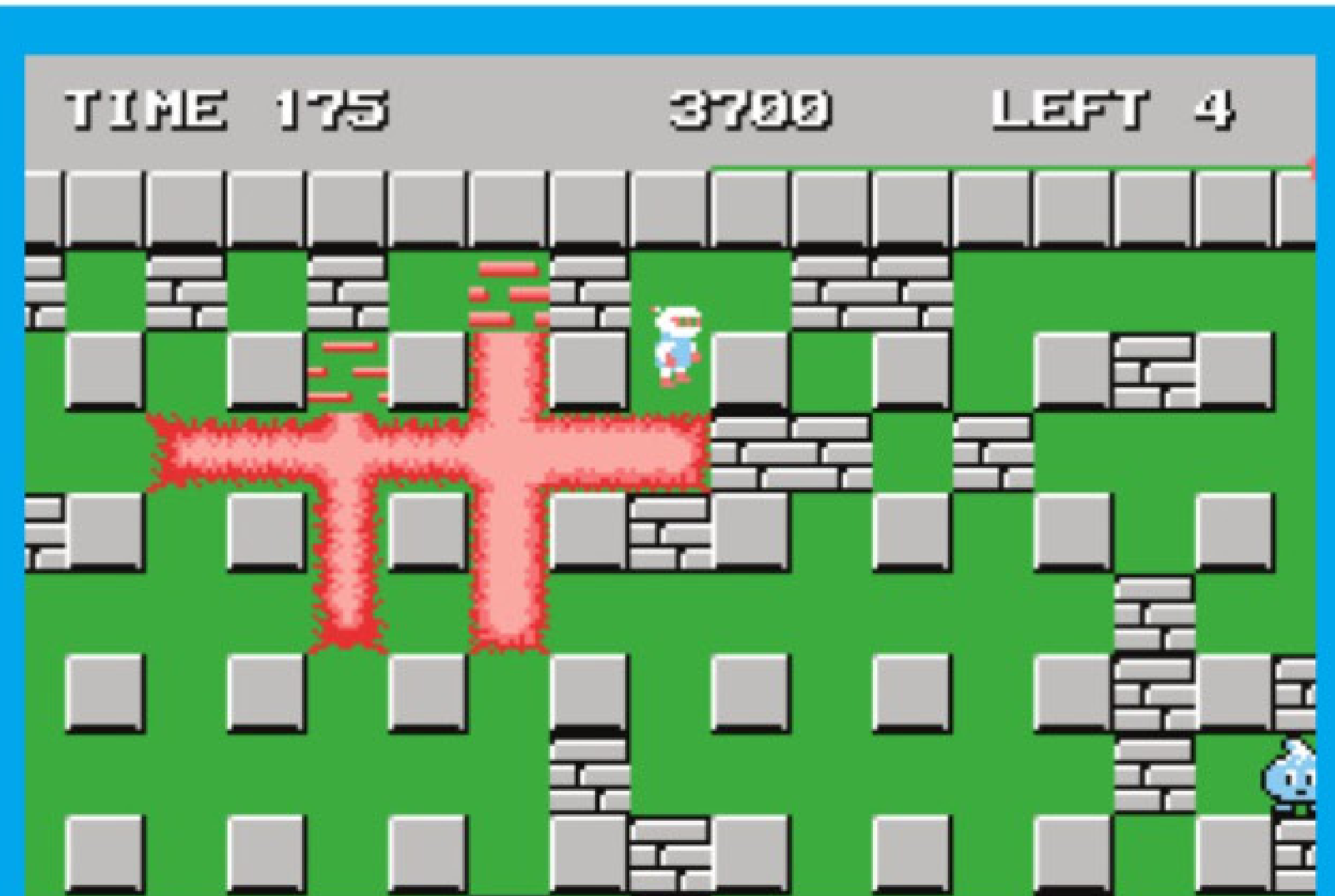


3-D BOMBERMAN 1984

SYSTEM: MSX

Hudson Soft tried plenty of different spins on the *Bomberman* formula, with this effort being the first notable example. *Bomberman* is still running around a maze trying to blow up enemies – but this time in 3D. While the sound of your running soon gets annoying, it becomes a surprisingly tense game of cat-and-mouse as you tear around the maze.





BOMBERMAN 1985

SYSTEM: MSX

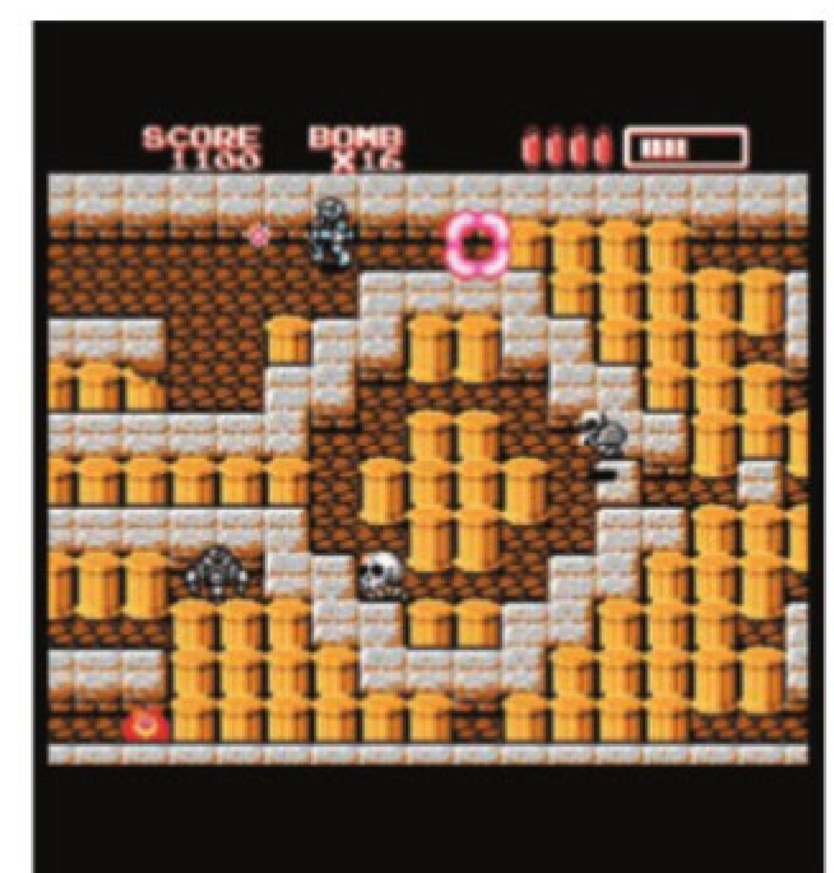
For many, the NES version of Hudson Soft's game is where the franchise really kicks off. It remains another single-player experience, but there's far more variety to both the gameplay and the levels. In fact, the stages are many, numbering some 50 compared to the 20 found in Bakudan Otoko. The levels also scroll horizontally, making them far larger than the single screen stages found in the earlier versions of the game. Power-ups have also been suitably enhanced and come in eight different flavours. Bombs drop additional bombs (duh); flames increase the length of explosions by a square; speed boosts your movement and wallpass lets you pass through walls letting you escape enemies more easily. Detonator lets you detonate bombs at will; bombpass helps when you block yourself in a corner; flamepass lets you ignore bomb explosions; while mystery grants temporary invincibility. Perhaps the most notable aspect of NES Bomberman however is that he was completely redrawn and changed from a hat-wearing human to the lovable robot we know today. It also became a huge hit for Hudson Soft, selling over 800,000 copies.



BOMBERMAN SPECIAL 1986

SYSTEM: MSX

The NES version of *Bomberman* was so popular that Hudson Soft converted it to the MSX. It features the same familiar music that became a series mainstay, but with slightly jerkier scrolling than its bigger brother.



BOMBER KING 1987

SYSTEM: FAMICOM

The gameplay in this spinoff is notably different as you're armed with a gun in addition to being able to drop your usual bombs. Sadly it's insanely difficult as bombs will often block your escape, causing you to swiftly lose your single life. It is known in Japan as *Robowarrior*.



BOMBERMAN 1990

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ Although it originated on NEC's PC Engine, this version of *Bomberman* was quickly ported to various home computers like the Amiga where it was typically known as *Dynablaster*. *Bomberman* now has eight worlds to traverse (each with eight stages) and must also face off against bosses. The biggest change to the series however is the superb multiplayer Battle Mode that catered for up to five players, and would go on to define the franchise for many years to come.



BOMBERMAN '93 1992

SYSTEM: PC ENGINE

■ The first of many PC Engine releases, this significantly changed the single-player and Battle Modes of the game. There's a lot more variety playing on your own, due to teleporters, conveyer belts and other devices that freshen up the gameplay. Many of these elements are carried over to the multiplayer, so gameplay is even more hectic than before.



BOMBERMAN WORLD 1992

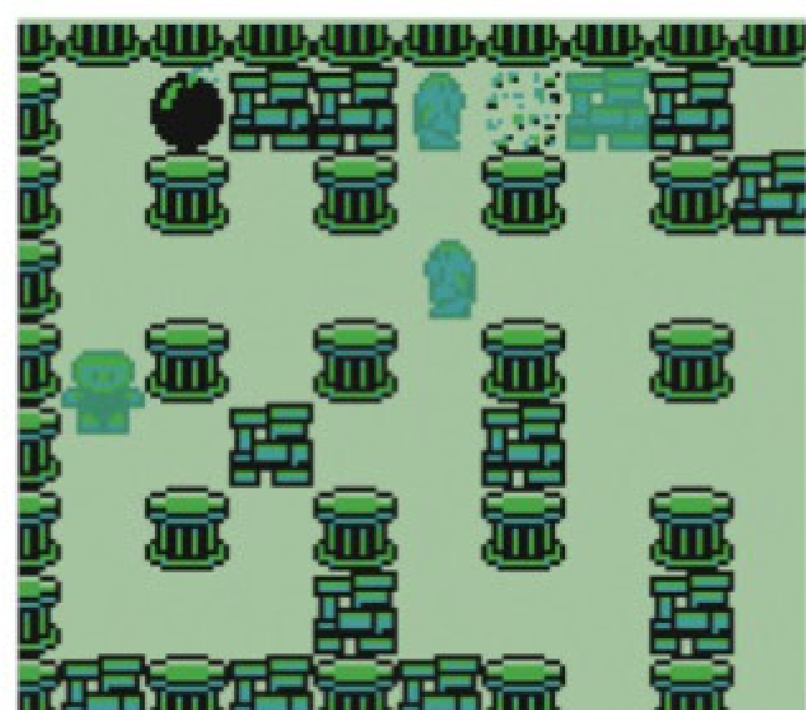
SYSTEM: ARCADE

■ More arcade shenanigans and another that was developed by Irem and not Hudson Soft. Like Irem's previous arcade game, you don't need to bomb blocks to find the exit, simply moving to the next level once all enemies have been defeated. Storywise it continues directly on from the events of *Bomberman*, with you hot in pursuit of King Bomber.

BOMBER BOY 1990

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

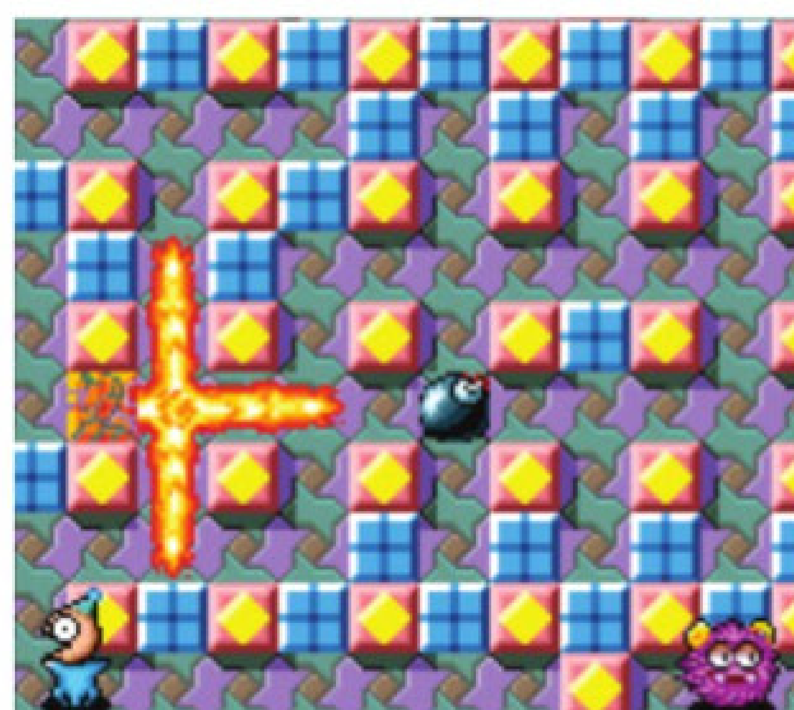
■ A fun adaptation that introduced more firsts for the franchise. Power-ups, called panels, could be bought from a shop at the beginning of a stage and also carried over to new stages, while the two multiplayer modes included one where you dropped four bombs at once.



BOMBERMAN 1991

SYSTEM: ARCADE

■ Another game nothing like the *Bomberman* game it's named after. Name confusion aside, this is a fun arcade adventure by Irem that lets you and three friends join together to take down King Bomber. You can stitch up friends to gain juicy power-ups for yourself, but ultimately you'll need to band together.



BOMBERMAN '94 1992

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ Also known as *Mega Bomberman* for its release on Sega's Mega Drive, *Bomberman '94* is notable for the addition of the Louies, Kangeroo-like creatures that Bomberman can ride on. There are five in total and each comes with its own unique ability that ranges from kicking bombs over blocks, to running extremely fast. The Louies add some much-needed variety to the series, particularly in Battle Mode. Like previous PC Engine games levels are divided across different worlds, with each final stage culminating in a showdown with a boss.



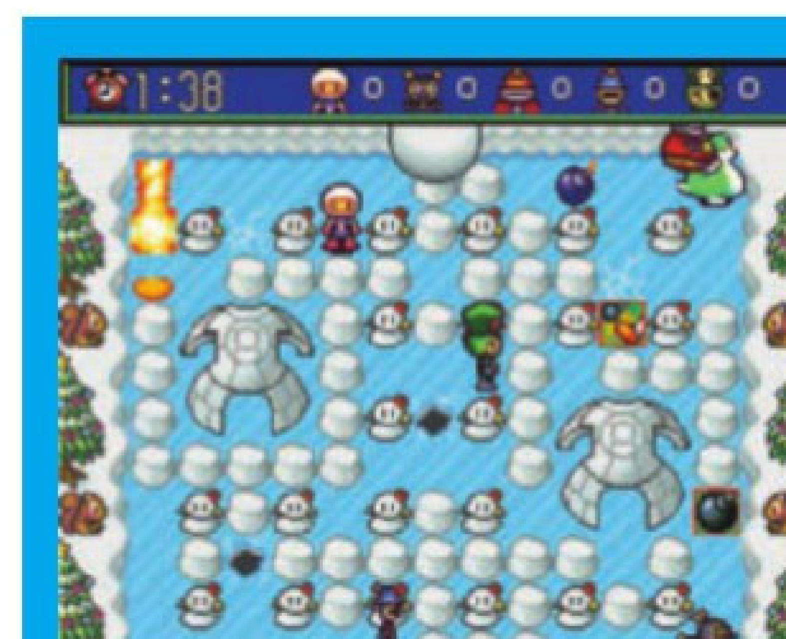


BOMBERMAN II 1991

SYSTEM: NES

■ This NES sequel is most notable for continuing the rivalry between White Bomberman and his cleverly named rival Black Bomberman. It's business as usual, with Bomberman dispatching monsters and fighting in Battle Mode. It feels like a step back for the franchise, with no bosses to defeat and it lacks the superior world structure found in the PC Engine game.







SUPER BOMBERMAN 1993

SYSTEM: SNES

■ White Bomberman and Black Bomberman team up together to take on the evil Carat Diamond (you couldn't make it up). Unlike earlier *Bombermans* there are no scrolling stages, with the action confined to a single screen. It's was the first game to use the Super Multitap, plus dying in story mode didn't cause you to start the level over again.





SUPER BOMBERMAN 2 1994

SYSTEM: SNES

We're not going to cover every *Super Bomberman* game as they're all largely the same. *Super Bomberman 2* is interesting, however, as it's the only one in the entire *Super* series to not feature a two-player mode. It's also the first to make clearing stages even more laborious as you needed to activate several switches to open the exit to the next level – and you had to play through an entire stage again upon dying, which was rubbish. Things fared better in Battle Mode though, as it introduced the Golden Bomber, which granted the winning player one of six power-ups that immediately gave them an advantage in the next round.

WARIO BLAST: FEATURING BOMBERMAN! 1994

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

Don't be fooled by the inclusion of Mario, this is just another *Bomberman* game. In fact it's *Bomberman GB* with the subtlety of a sledgehammer addition of Nintendo bad boy Wario. It's otherwise a relatively boring version of the game, with blurry visuals and some uninspiring gameplay. One to avoid, if we're completely honest.



BOMBERMAN: PANIC BOMBER 1994

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The success of *Tetris* saw every publisher desperate for its own 'falling blocks' hit and the aim of *Panic Bomber* was to fill up your opponent's well with rubble. Different-coloured Bombermen would fall from the sky and you needed to match three or more together to summon a bomb. It's a sound concept that predictably works better against a human rival.



BOMBERMAN GB 2 1995

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

The most notable thing about this Game Boy version is how it shamelessly ripped off *Indiana Jones*. Taking control of Indy Bomber you explore a vast jungle looking for the fabled Ring Of Wishes. This essentially equated to the same old *Bomberman* gameplay, although you could choose whether you simply kill all enemies to advance to the next stage, or defeat them in a specific order. While the graphics are fairly throwaway, failing to make the most of the Game Boy's space on the tiny screen, it is blessed with some cute cutscenes that add some much needed character. An entertaining adventure well worth seeking out.



SATURN BOMBERMAN 1996

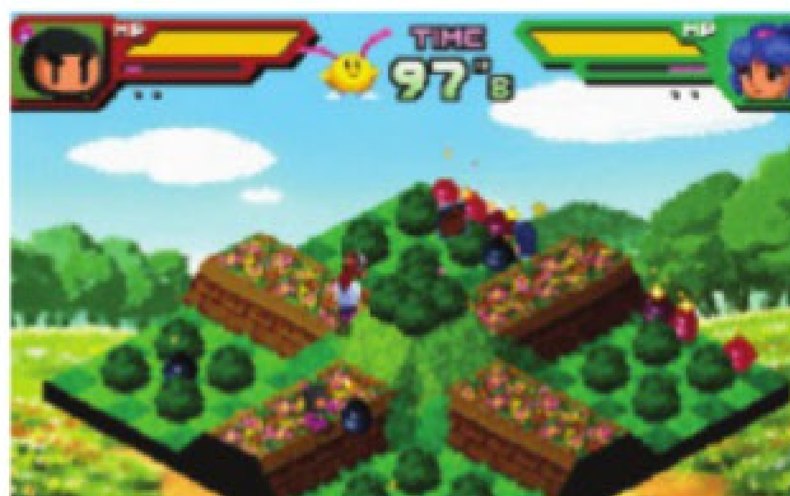
SYSTEM: SATURN

Many consider this to be the best multiplayer *Bomberman* available. The reason? It caters for an amazing ten players. The core game is nothing special, being spread across the usual five themed stages. It does introduce Tirras, which are effectively dinosaur versions of the Kangeroo-like Louies from previous games, but it adds little new to the tried-and-tested formula. *Saturn Bomberman* really comes alive in its Battle Mode, delivering standard and team death matches and the option to play a gruelling 100 matches if desired. Upon elimination, players revive on the sides of the arenas and are able to fling bombs at surviving players. Sadly, the Pal version lacked the online play of its NTSC peers. It's all rounded off with a Master Game mode that has you clearing enemies across 20 floors as quickly as possible.

SATURN BOMBERMAN FIGHT!! 1997

SYSTEM: SATURN

This Saturn exclusive has a number of *Bomberman* firsts. The arenas are isometric and use 3D graphics, Bomberman can now jump over blocks and other hazards and he now has an energy bar. There's also a new Survival Mode where you face off against an endless supply of opponents.



SUPER BOMBERMAN 5 1997

SYSTEM: SNES

The final SNES game shook things up ever so gently by offering non-linear level progression in the main game. The different zones are based on previous games in the series (they all have smart remixed music) making *Super Bomberman 5* a lovely tribute to its four predecessors and the series in general.



NEO BOMBERMAN NEO GEO

SYSTEM: 1997

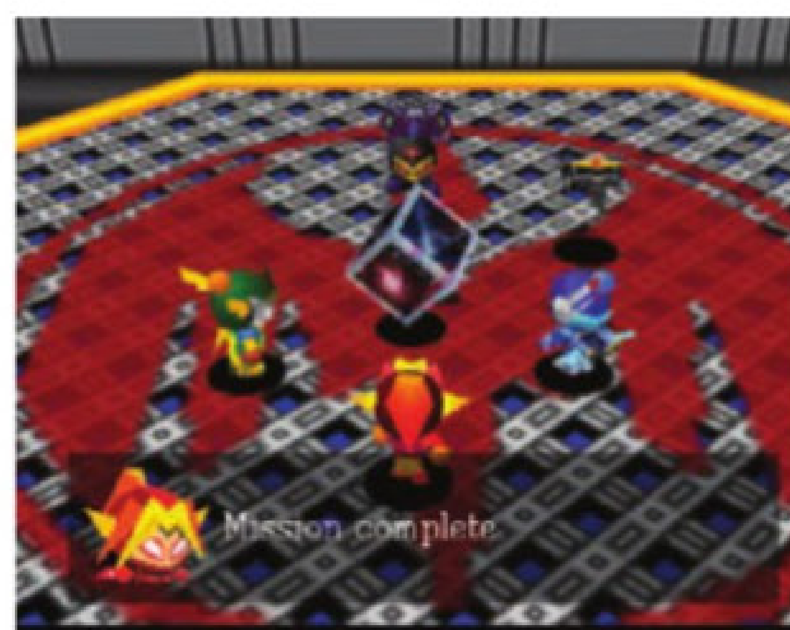
Here Battle Mode only caters for two players – but Story Mode is pretty good, with some great 2D visuals, a variety of enemies and the ability to rescue trapped Bomberman, who will proceed to help you on the rest of the stage.



BOMBERMAN 64 1997

SYSTEM: N64

There are quite a few firsts included in the N64's first *Bomberman* game. It's the first in the series to be fully 3D, has something approaching a half-decent story and plays like an action adventure with the odd bit of platforming thrown in. Another new addition is the ability to pump bombs to create more powerful detonations, while hitting enemies stuns you instead of outright killing you. Unfortunately, the multiplayer mode itself is far weaker than past games due to its bigger free-roaming levels.



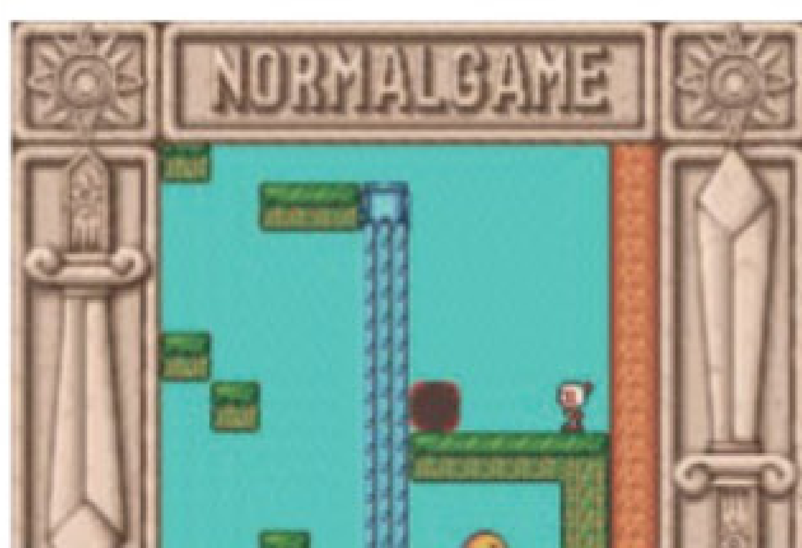


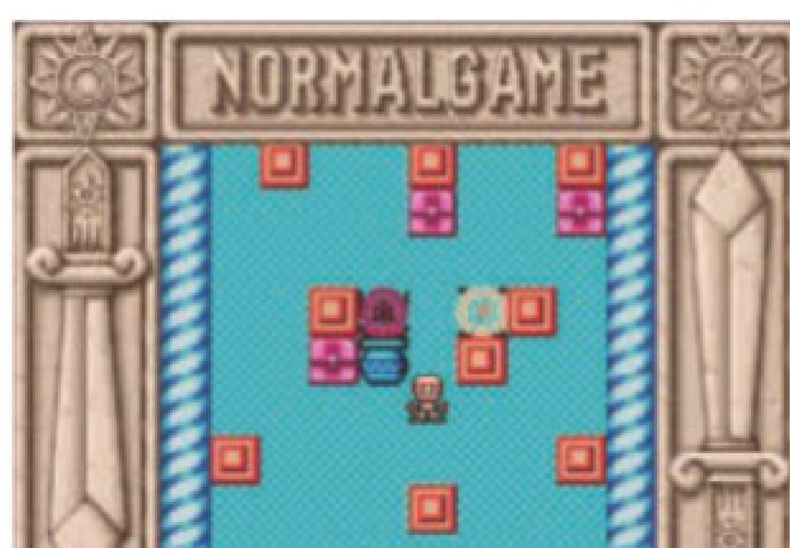
BOMBERMAN HERO 1998

SYSTEM: N64

Creating a modern-day *Bomberman* without a multiplayer mode seems like suicide. It didn't stop Hudson Soft however, and the N64's second exclusive proved another interesting outing for the iconic character. There's a far bigger emphasis on platforming compared to *Bomberman 64*, and a greater emphasis on revisiting levels due to the score system employed. While Bomberman can no longer pump bombs, he can instead throw up to four bombs by holding down the fire button – not bad at all.







POCKET BOMBERMAN 1998

SYSTEM: GAME BOY, GAME BOY COLOR

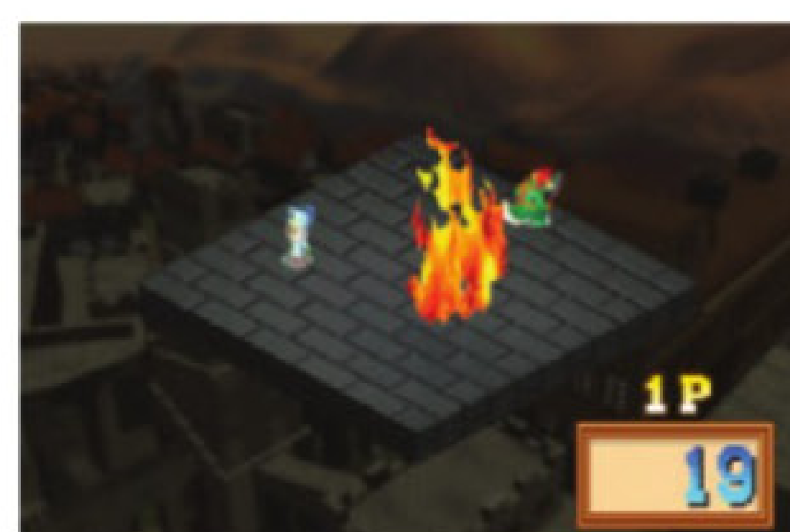
While *Pocket Bomberman* sticks to the same old formula. it at least does it from a new viewpoint. The action is now side-on, allowing Bomberman to jump around stages like he could in the N64 releases. It freshens up the gameplay dramatically, while the mini-game – in which you constantly jump higher and higher using the available platforms – predates *Doodle Jump* by a good 11 years.



BOMBERMAN WORLD 1998

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION

The first *Bomberman* game to hit PlayStation is a pretty fun one. You can now simply exit a level by collecting the crystals scattered around each stage. The levels are cleverly constructed, while the addition of a new time trial mode adds greatly to the game's longevity. The only real letdown is its slightly isometric viewpoint that initially makes it hard to judge exactly where dropped bombs are.



BOMBERMAN WARS 1998

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION, SEGA SATURN

This noteworthy addition to the franchise never appeared outside Japan. It's an SRPG where you must use your five-strong unit to take down a rival team. You have five turns before bombs go off, which adds greatly to the overall strategy, as you're always trying to position yourself to avoid deadly blasts. A word of warning though, there's a lot of trial and error working out the gameplay due to the language barrier.



BOMBERMAN FANTASY RACE 1998

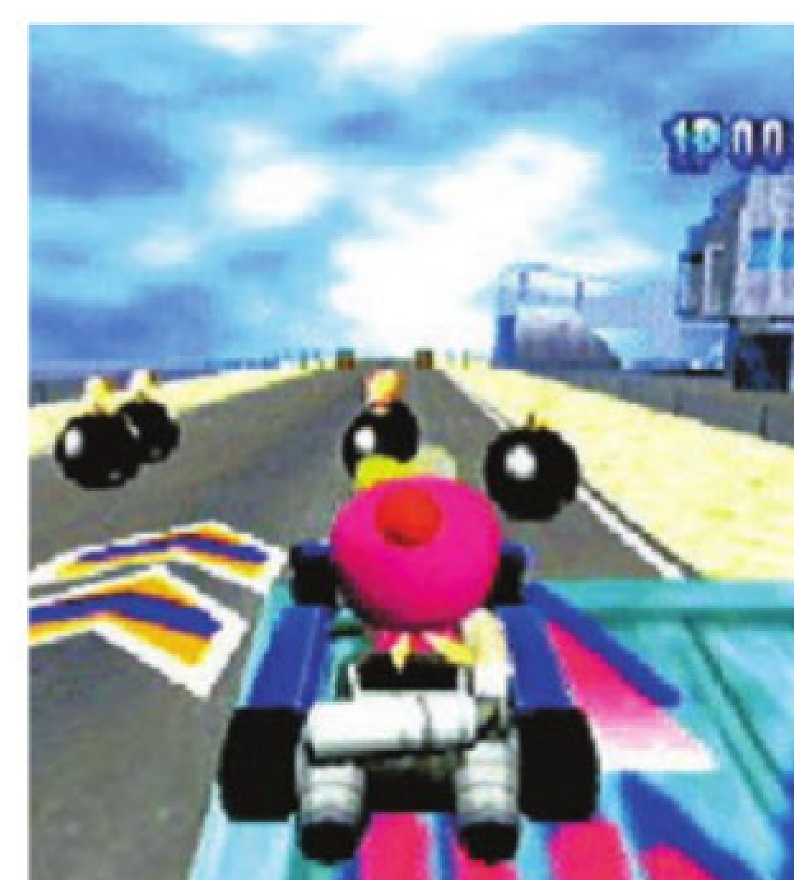
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION

Bomberman's first racing game certainly wouldn't be his last. Players race on Louies and Tirras and must tear around the eight courses as quickly as possible. You can increase your ride's speed for a limited time by pushing up on the D-pad and buy new weapons at the start of each new race. Unfortunately it's let down by its clunky controls, which make cornering a real challenge.

BOMBERMAN KART 2001

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2

More racing, this time in the form of a *Mario Kart* clone. The tracks are nice and varied, there's a good range of power-ups and you can have up to four players racing at once. Another nice addition is that there's a full traditional *Bomberman* game included as well. In fact, many prefer it to the main game – we certainly did.



MOBILE BATTLES

Taking it to the small screen



Bomberman, like Pac-Man before him, has appeared in plenty of mobile phone games. In fact he's appeared in so many (with plenty exclusive to Japan) that it made more sense to give them their own section. It's also worth mentioning that many of these games were only available for a short amount of time, meaning that unless you downloaded them the first time around, you're unlikely to ever see them again. *Bomberman Special* was one of the earliest releases, appearing in 2002, and was quickly followed by *Bomberman Kart*, *Pinball* and *RPG*. There's a decent conversion of *Super Bomberman*, and the PC Engine and Mega Drive hit *Bomberman '94* was also ported in 2008.

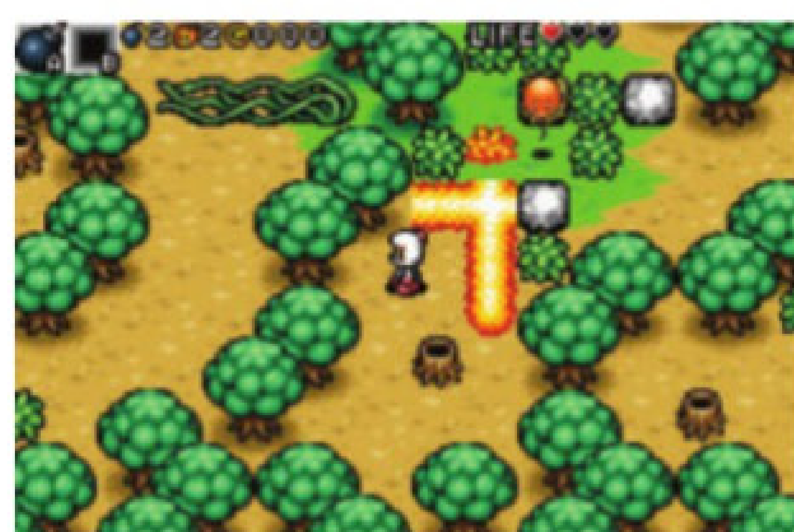
A more risqué side of *Bomberman* also appeared in 2008, with the release of *R20* Moe Bomberman*, which teamed the iconic hero up with the stars of Hudson Soft's adult games series. Competition *Bomberman Geek*, on the other hand, catered for up to eight players and rewards victories by spawning items closer to you. *Bomberman Act: Zero*, unfotunately, was a crappy rendition of the equally crappy Xbox 360 game, while the elegantly titled *Rose O'Neill Kewpie Bomberman* was another crossover that spliced *Bomberman* action with cute picture book cutscenes. By far the most interesting however is *100 Man Battle Bomberman*, which pits you against 99 other CPU-controlled Bombermen, resulting in delicious chaos.



BOMBERMAN 64: ARCADE EDITION 2001

SYSTEM: N64

■ This last *Bomberman* game to be released for the N64, this is incredibly rare nowadays. A more traditional version of the game, but you can uncover multiple exits that allow for a branching route similar to the *Darius* shooting games.



BOMBERMAN TOURNAMENT 2001

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

■ Tournament sees the White Bomber tackling the adventure RPG genre. It shares elements with both *Zelda* and *Neutopia*, but adds a further twist to the gameplay with Karabon battles, which is a take on *Pokémon*.





BOMBERMAN GENERATION 2002

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE

■ *Generation* was one of the first GameCube games to feature cel-shaded graphics. There's more emphasis on puzzle-solving compared to the earlier games – but it's the multiplayer where *Generation* truly shines. It has a range of fantastic modesthat can be tweaked and it feels spiritually similar to the early *Super Bomberman* games – a great thing.



DREAMMIX TV WORLD FIGHTERS 2003

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE

■ Not a true *Bomberman* game, but this crossover between Takara, Hudson Soft and Konami is so strange we had to include it. Essentially a clone of *Super Smash Bros*, but one that features a host of characters from all three firm. Sadly, while it sounds fine on paper, the execution is lacking, with messy combat, uninspired special moves and lacklustre mini-games.



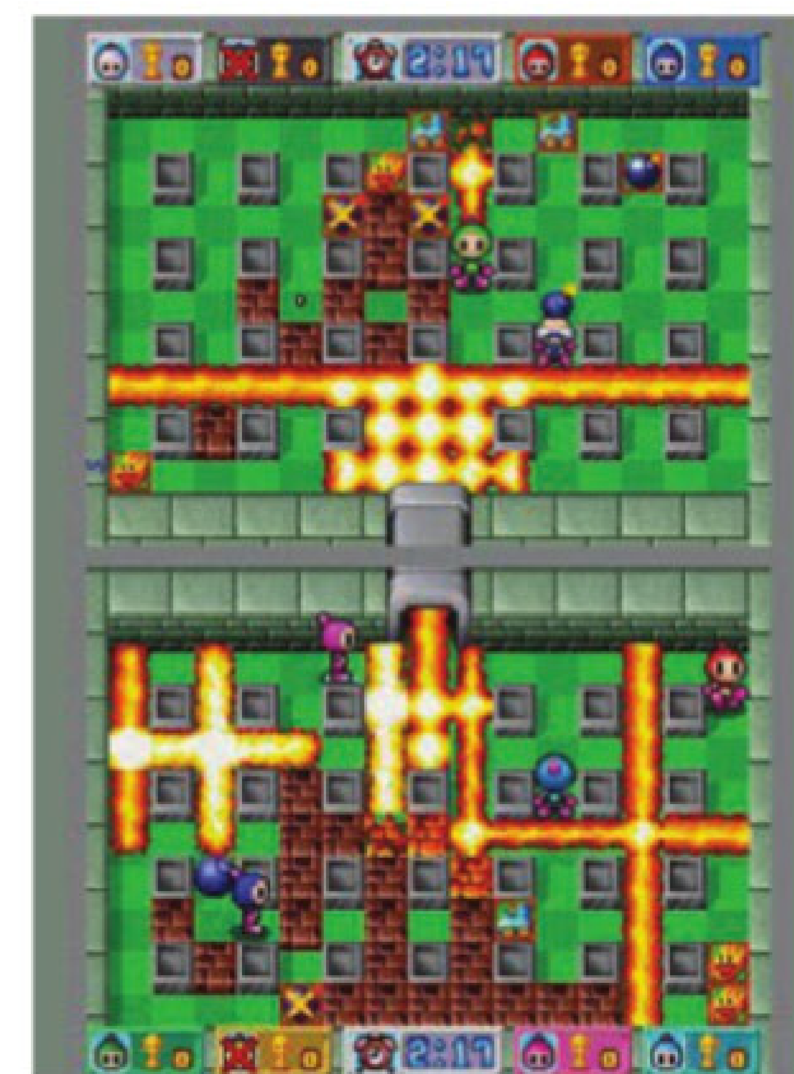
BOMBERMAN HARDBALL 2005

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2

■ Bomberman and his mates decide to get all sporty on us, participating in games of golf, tennis and baseball. The games are fun enough, and the ability to customise your character with money earned in-game is a nice touch, but it still makes for a rather odd addition to the series that sticks out like a sore thumb. It's lucky, then, that a decent battle mode is also included.

BOMBERMAN DS 2005

SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS



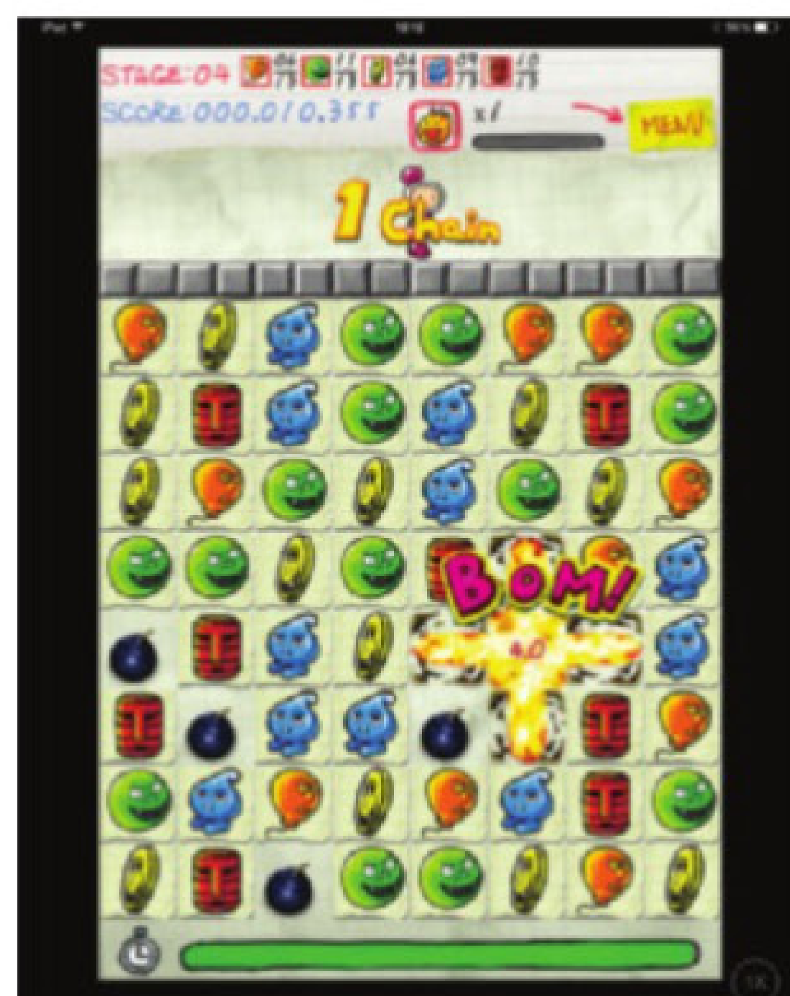
■ The first DS game outing for Bomberman is a good one, introducing a new item screen that allows you to power-up your character upon losing a life, and some larger playing areas that are spread across both screens. The battle mode has also enhanced for this edition, with Super Revenge mode that enables you to switch places with a currently competing player if you hit them with a bomb flicked from the touch screen.

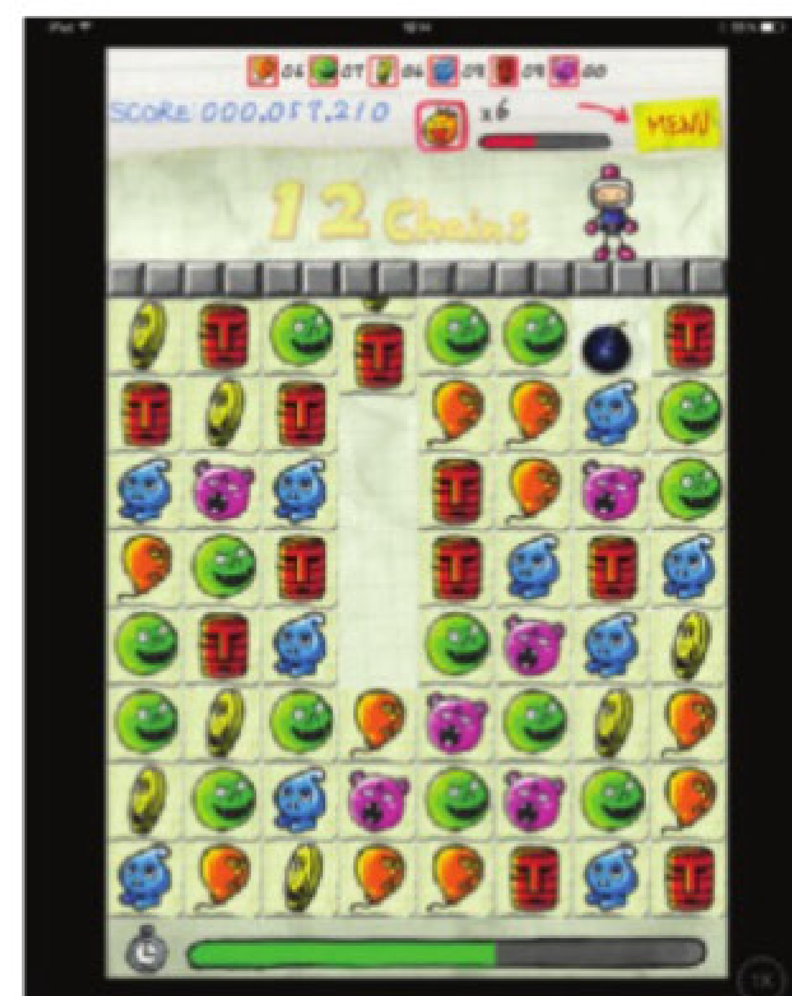


BOMBERMAN: ACT ZERO 2006

SYSTEM: XBOX 360

Kudos for Hudson Soft for taking the franchise is a new direction, and kudos to anyone who had the strength to endure this awful, awful game. The bright cartoon colours have been replaced with dull greys (it's a dystopian future, see?) and there's a new 'First-Person Battle' mode, which is as rubbish as it sounds. It's still *Bomberman*, but it's *Bomberman* with its soul ripped out. An utter train wreck of a game that we're still trying to erase from our memories.





BOMBERMAN CHAINS 2011

SYSTEM: IOS

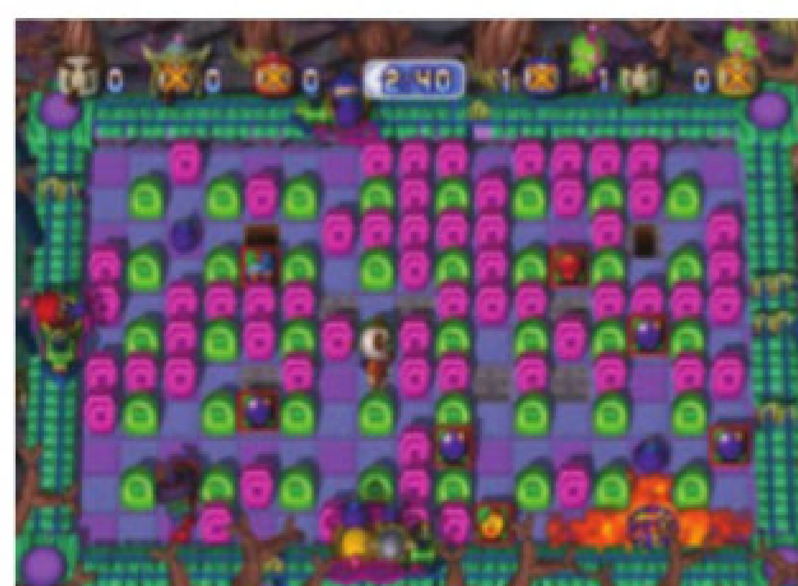
This appears to be the last official *Bomberman* game Hudson Soft worked on, bringing a sad end to the three-decade-old franchise. It's a rather simplistic match-three game that gives you a little extra time to set up additional chains. Stylistically it looks nice, but it's a dull end to Hudson Soft's enduring franchise.



BOMBERMAN LAND 2007

SYSTEM: WII, PSP

While this particular offshoot of the franchise began in 1998 on PlayStation, we're plumping for this later Wii release. It features 40 mini-games that work well around the Wii's unique controller. The Battle Mode also has a large number of customisable options available. In short, it's a fun addition to the series.



BOMBERMAN LIVE 2007

SYSTEM: XBOX 360

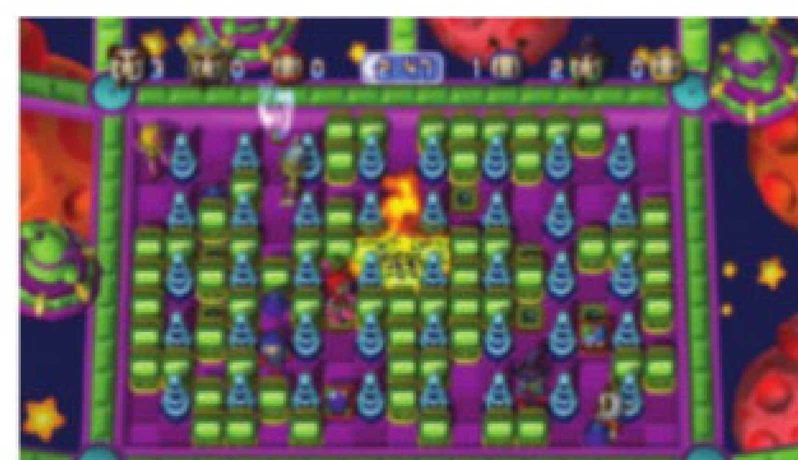
Superb game from Backbone Entertainment that allows up to eight players to battle it out online. Due to its online nature there's no single-player mode at all, but the large list of tweakable options and two available play modes ensure plenty of hectic battles. A sequel, which included Xbox Live Avatar support, appeared in 2010.

BOMBERMAN ULTRA 2009

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 3

One of the last traditional *Bomberman* games carried on the template that had been adopted by *Live*. There's an even bigger emphasis on customising your character, with 14 different stages to fight across. The levels are also customisable, while the local multiplayer caters for seven players. Strangely, it's still eight online like *Bomberman Live*.



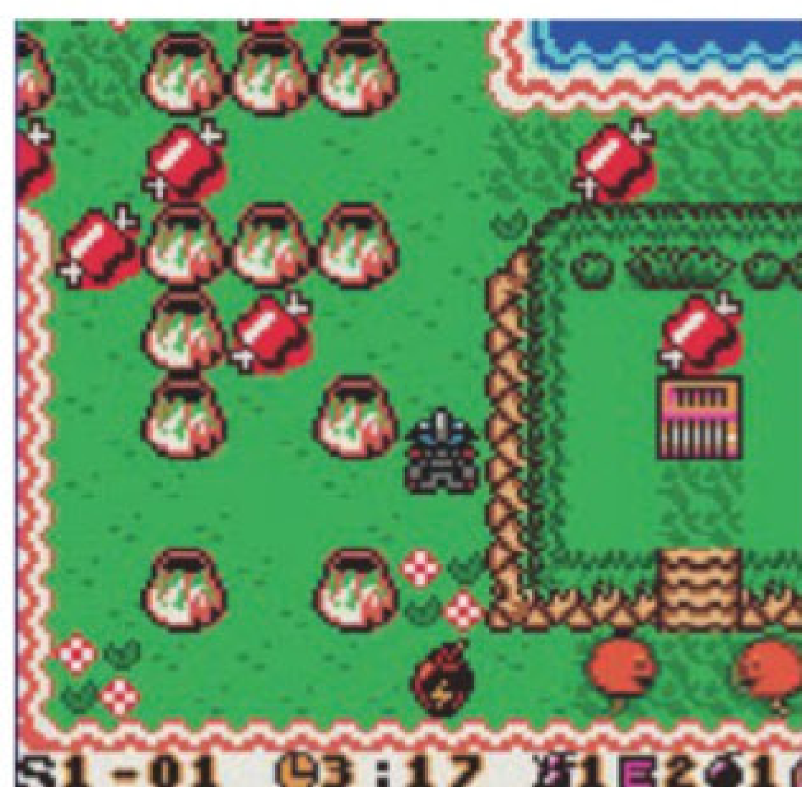


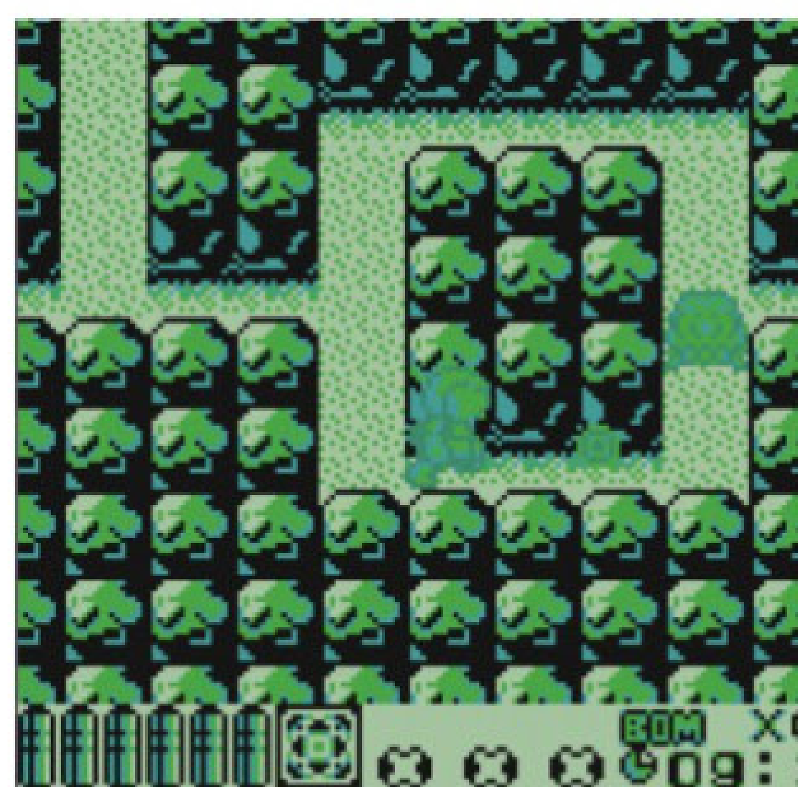
AND THE REST...

There are so many Bomberman games, and there is such little time...

- **BLASTER MASTER BOY**
  YEAR: 1991 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY
- **HI-TEN BOMBERMAN**
  YEAR: 1993 **SYSTEMS:** CUSTOM NEC COMPUTER
- **SUPER BOMBERMAN 3**
  YEAR: 1995 **SYSTEMS:** SNES
- **SUPER BOMBERMAN 4**
  YEAR: 1996 **SYSTEMS:** SNES
- **BOMBERMAN GB 3**
  YEAR: 1996 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY
- **ATOMIC BOMBERMAN**
  YEAR: 1996 **SYSTEMS:** PC
- **BOMBERMAN B-DAMAN**
  YEAR: 1996 **SYSTEMS:** SNES
- **BOMBERMAN PARTY EDITION**
  YEAR: 1998 **SYSTEMS:** PLAYSTATION
- **BOMBERMAN QUEST**
  YEAR: 1999 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY COLOR
- **BOMBERMAN LAND**
  YEAR: 1999 **SYSTEMS:** PLAYSTATION
- **BOMBERMAN 64: THE SECOND ATTACK**
  YEAR: 2000 **SYSTEMS:** N64
- **BOMBERMAN MAX**
  YEAR: 2000 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY COLOR
- **BOMBERMAN ONLINE**
  YEAR: 2001 **SYSTEMS:** DREAMCAST
- **BOMBERMAN JETTERS**
  YEAR: 2002 **SYSTEMS:** GAMECUBE, PLAYSTATION 2
- **BOMBERMAN MAX 2**
  YEAR: 2002 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY ADVANCE

- **BOMBERMAN JETTERS: THE LEGEND OF BOMBERMAN**
  YEAR: 2002 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **ONLINE BOMBERMAN**
  YEAR: 2002 **SYSTEMS:** PC
- **BOMBERMAN LAND 2**
  YEAR: 2003 **SYSTEMS:** GAMECUBE, PLAYSTATION 2
- **BOBOMBERMAN**
  YEAR: 2004 **SYSTEMS:** GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **BOMBERMAN LAND 3**
  YEAR: 2005 **SYSTEMS:** PLAYSTATION 2
- **BOMBERMAN PSP**
  YEAR: 2006 **SYSTEMS:** PSP
- **BOMBERMAN: BAKUFUU SENTAI BOMBERMEN**
  YEAR: 2006 **SYSTEMS:** PSP
- **BOMBERMAN LAND TOUCH!**
  YEAR: 2006 **SYSTEMS:** NINTENDO DS
- **BOMBERMAN STORY DS**
  YEAR: 2007 **SYSTEMS:** NINTENDO DS
- **BOMBERMAN BLAST**
  YEAR: 2008 **SYSTEMS:** WII
- **BOMBERMAN TOUCH: THE LEGEND OF THE MYSTIC BOMB**
  YEAR: 2008 **SYSTEMS:** IOS
- **BOMBERMAN 2**
  YEAR: 2008 **SYSTEMS:** NINTENDO DS
- **BOMBERMAN TOUCH 2: VOLCANO PARTY**
  YEAR: 2009 **SYSTEMS:** IOS
- **BOMBERMAN BLITZ**
  YEAR: 2009 **SYSTEMS:** NINTENDO DS
- **BOMBERMAN LIVE: BATTLEFEST**
  YEAR: 2010 **SYSTEMS:** XBOX LIVE ARCADE
- **BOMBERMAN DOJO**
  YEAR: 2010 **SYSTEMS:** ANDROID, IOS



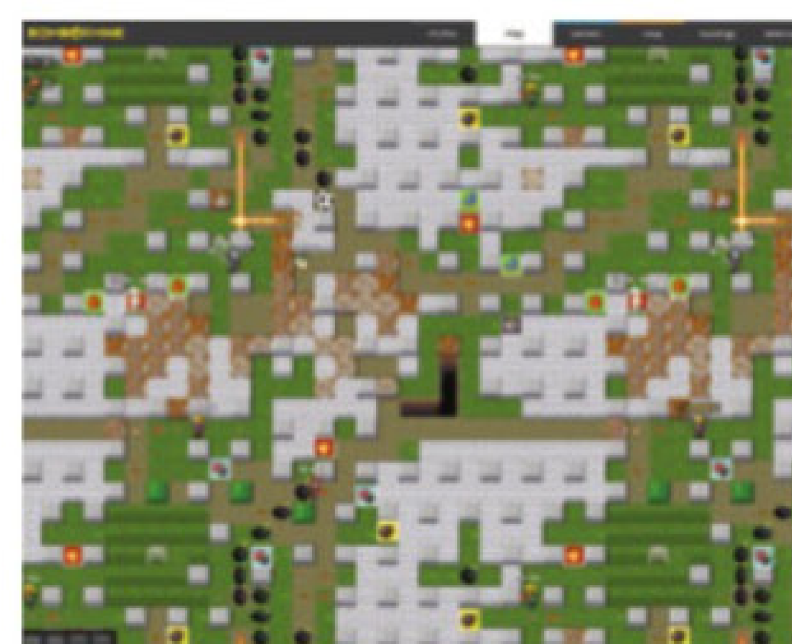




ATTACK OF THE CLONES



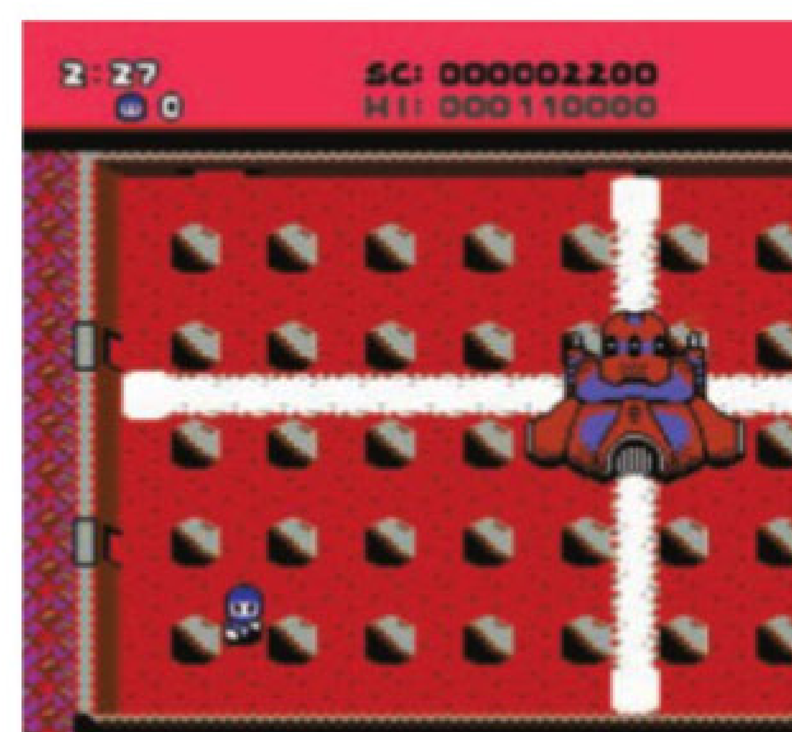
Like Bomberman, only not



BOMBERMINE
2013

SYSTEM: PC (BROWSER)

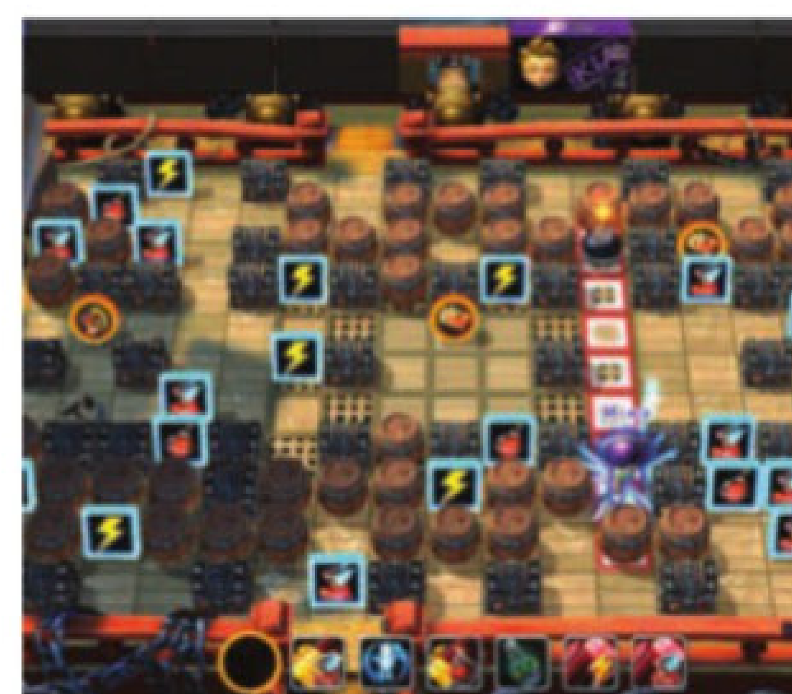
One of the most recent *Bomberman* clones is an epic MMO that caters for up to 1,000 players at once. An utterly chaotic experience, but an incredibly fun one thanks to all sorts of insane power-ups.



BOMBERLAND
2013

SYSTEM: C64

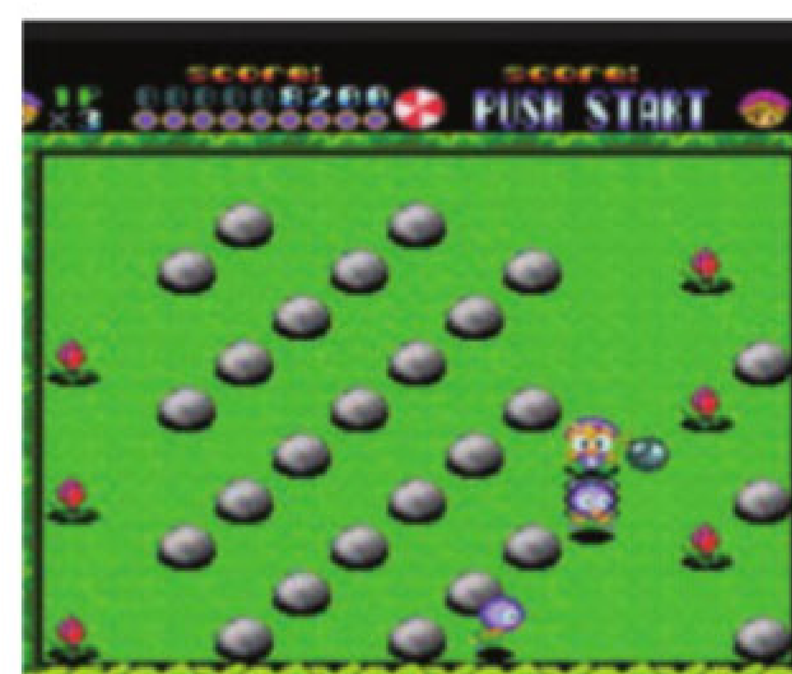
This Commodore 64 clone has spent a staggering ten years in development. The wait was worth it though, as it features high-resolution graphics and caters for five players. It's available in both physical and download forms, so head to **www.rgcd.bigcartel.com**.



BOMB BUDDIES
2012

SYSTEM: PC (BROWSER)

A *Bomberman* clone that's free-to-play with lots of content. Like many modern *Bomberman* games it supports up to eight players and also features customisable characters. Unfortunately, there's a big emphasis on spending cash.



BOMBOY
1993

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

Gametec unofficially released this *Bomberman* clone for the Mega Drive in 1993. While it features co-operative play, it also features terrible music, awkward level design and garish-looking visuals, and no multiplayer at all.



BOMB MANIA
2013

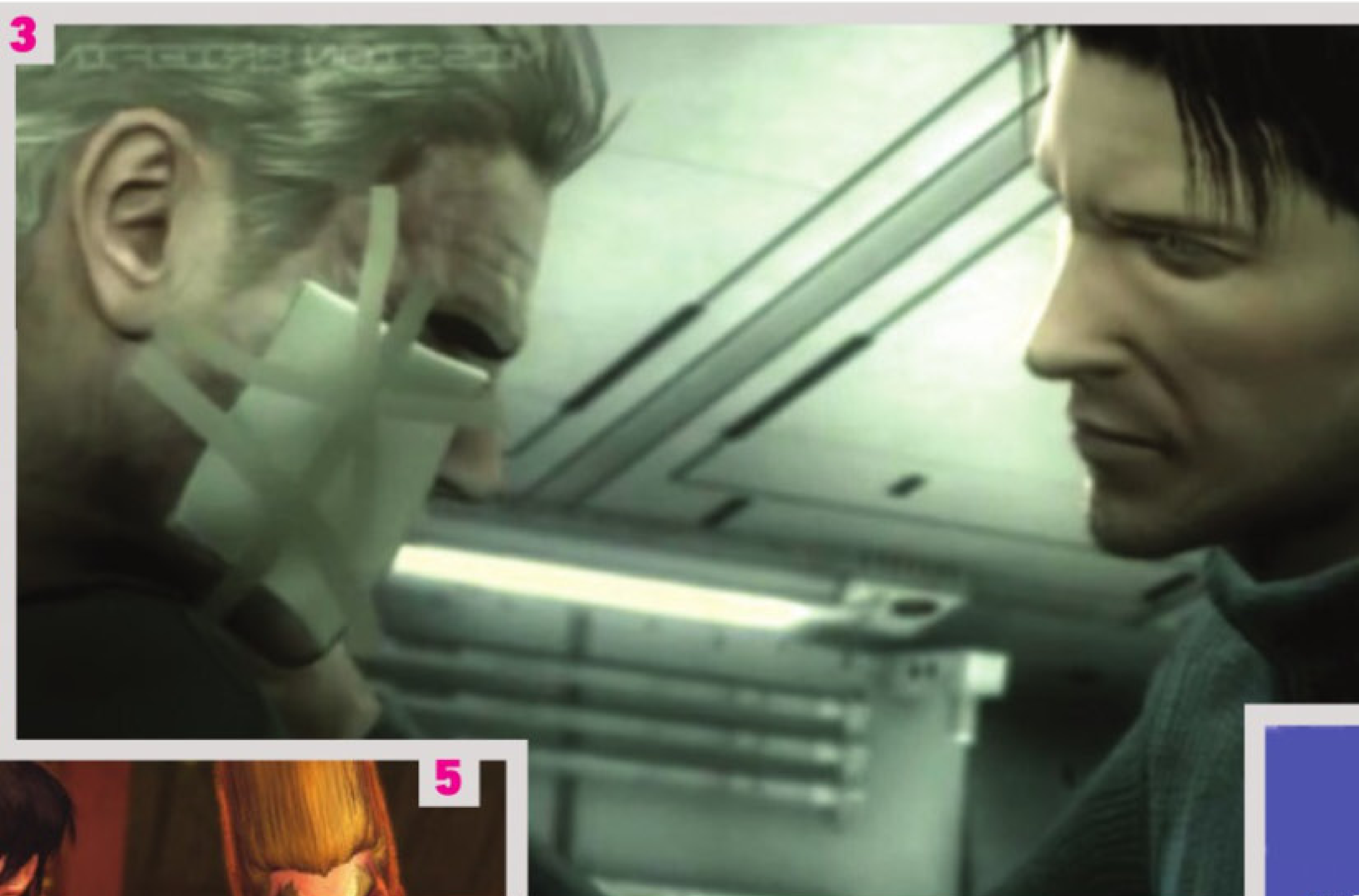
SYSTEM: C64

Another C64 *Bomberman* clone, this time by Protovision. Although it only supports four players, it has a great selection of multiplayer games that range from letting you hide bombs in pipes to using mushrooms to create huge extended chain reactions.

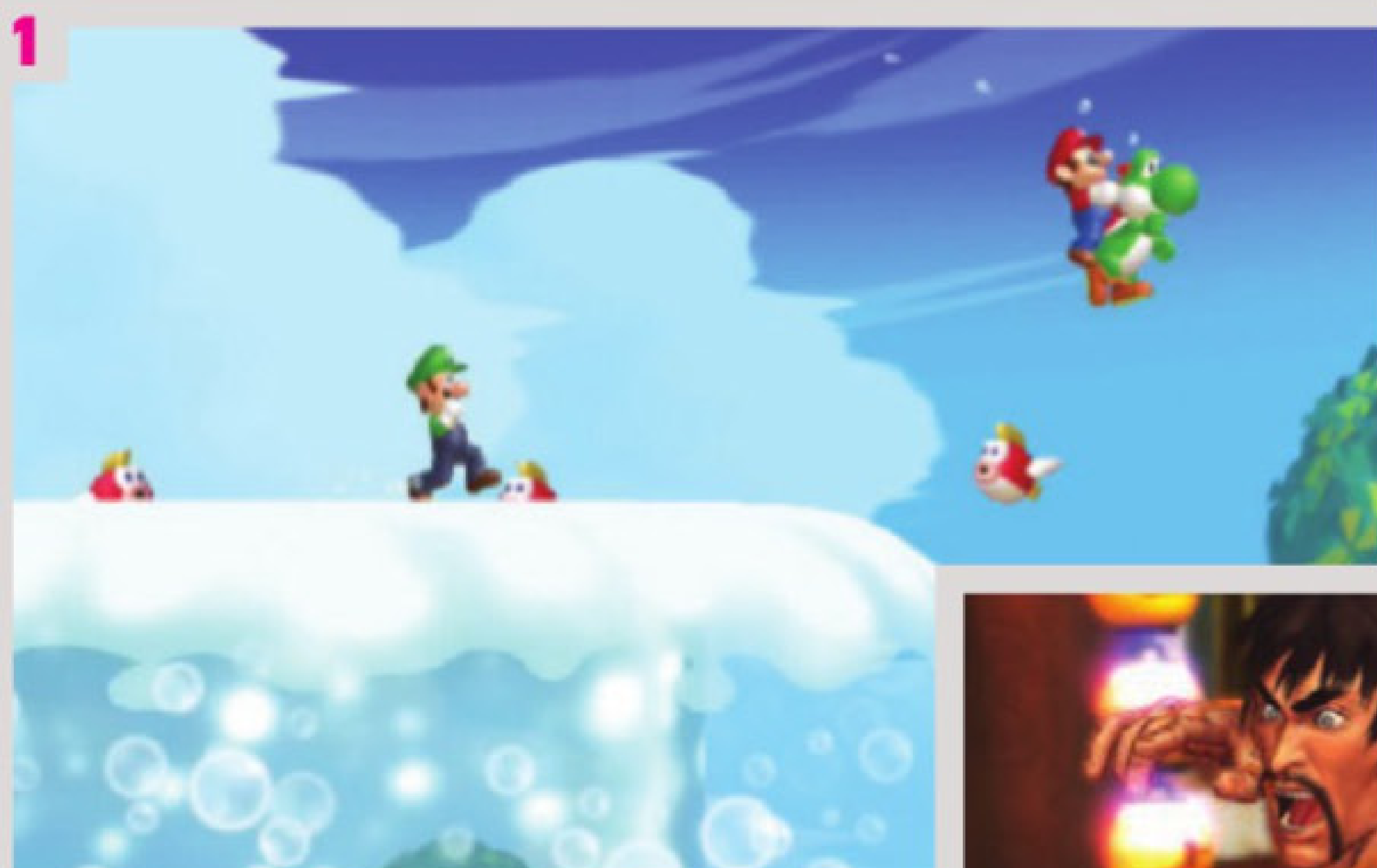
ESSENTIALS

10 GAMING'S TOP 10 BROMANCES

The term bromance may be scoffed at, but it's a neologism that's earned its place among in modern society, so it's interesting to see how games treat this term for male bonding. A 'bro' is someone that's got your back and someone who's built a relationship out of trust and support. With that in mind, we put together the best ten bromances you'll see in gaming.



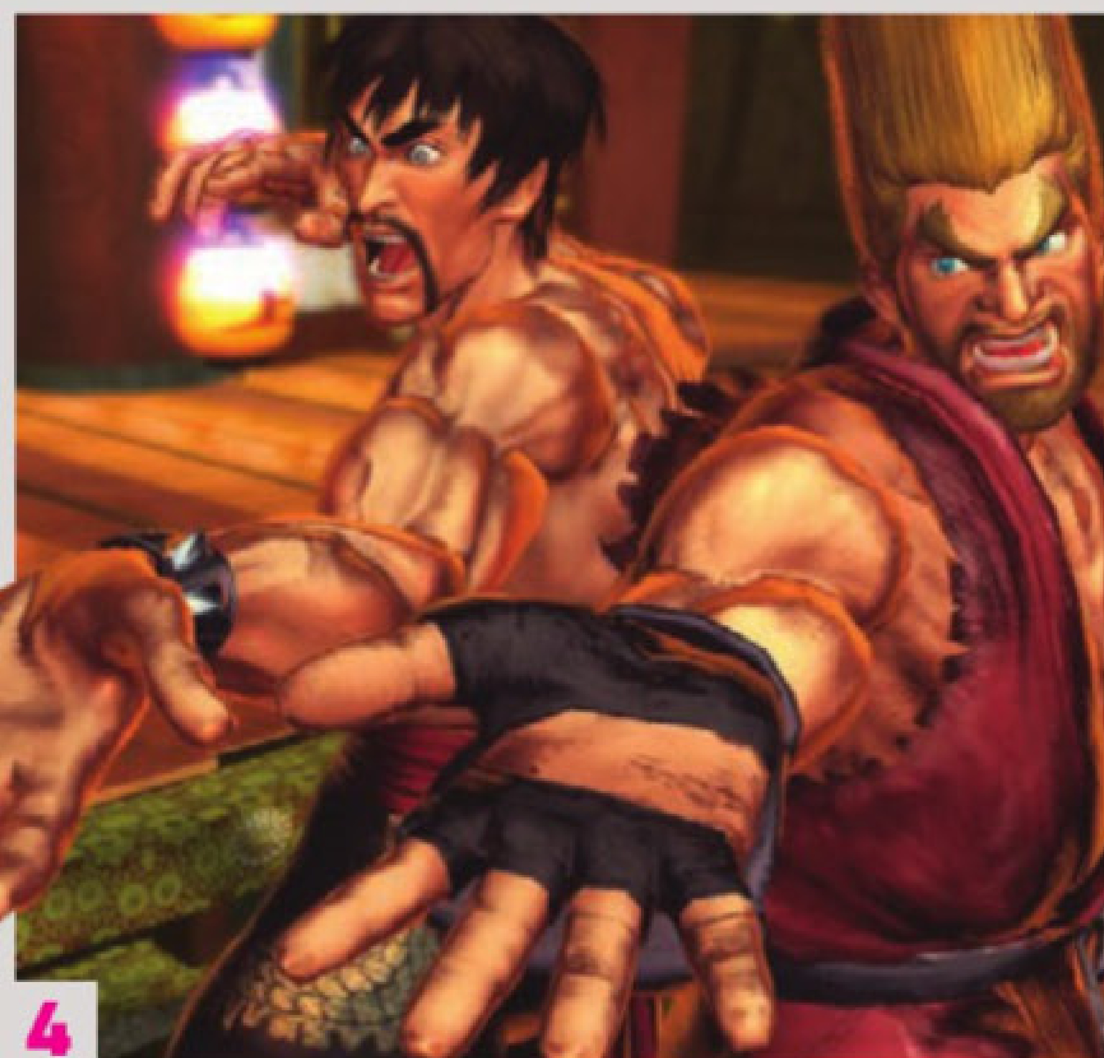
3



1



2



4



5

Mario & Luigi
From: Super Mario Bros

1 Of course Mario and Luigi head up this list! Not only are they the gaming world's most iconic duo, they're also they tightest brothers around. Mario's eternal quest to take out the monstrous Bowser is undeniably self-serving (after all, Mario only really wants to rescue Peach), and yet, though it all, loyal brother Luigi sticks by his side. Whether he's driving alongside his brother, being squashed into a ball by him or simply coming in second-best to him, Luigi remains both loyal and attentive, ready to take on anything. Come to think of it, we think that the term 'bro' actually came from *Super Mario Bros* in the first place.

Shepard & Garrus
From: Mass Effect

2 Their relationship got off to a rocky start – it all began informed more by necessity than by any genuine desire to be around each other. However, as Garrus spent more and more time aboard the Normandy (and as he performed more and more calibrations), he became indispensable not just to the N7 team, but to Shepard specifically. Of course, we write this assuming that you played as the male Shepard, but the bromance was almost as intense as the romance that you could engage with female Shepard; both these relationships built on the same foundations, both built on deep, mutual respect.

Snake & Hal
From: Metal Gear Solid

3 Hal 'Otacon' Emmerich got his nickname from the Japanese animation and culture convention that he attended without fail; Otakon. A fervent anime fanboy, Otakon's obsessive nature comes out in his relationship with Snake, too – built on deceptive ground, the duo eventually galvanised their bromance after living through a variety of Kojima-grade crazy missions together. Both Snake and Hal had been alone for a long time before their eventual friendship, and that loneliness inspired their relationship to deep abnormally quickly. The defining moment in their bromance? *That* handshake, of course!

Paul & Law
From: Tekken

4 Which Law does this refer to, Marshall or Forest? Both, oddly. Originally, Paul was a very close friend to Marshall, regularly eating at his restaurant. As of the events of *Tekken 5*, Paul lands Marshall's son – Forest – in a motorcycle accident. Marshall promised to enter the fifth King of Iron Fist tournament in hopes of securing enough money to pay off his son's extortionate medical bills. Feeling responsible, and owing a debt to both the father and his son, Paul decided to team up with Marshall, and they entered the tournament together… that would make a great film, right?

Da Vinci/Ezio
From: Assassin's Creed II

5 The most historically accurate bros in our list (…maybe), Ezio proved that just because you are living in a world that is ruled by a corrupt Pope, under the thumb of a secret pan-global imperialist regime, it doesn't necessarily mean that you can't establish a friendly and productive relationship with one of the Renaissance's best minds. Da Vinci and Ezio's partnership certainly went deeper than a mutual interest in their Pope-dethronement ideology; their little moments on the benches overlooking Italian landscapes together were nothing short of romantic – nothing short of a deep, meaningful and caring bromance.




7


9


6


8


10

Sonic/Tails
From: Sonic The Hedgehog 2

6 Sonic, as we all now know, has absolutely *got* to go fast – and being one of the fastest living creatures on earth, that's his right. Sadly though, Miles 'Tails' Prower isn't quite as fast as his blue friend; making his debut in *Sonic 2*, most gamers' enduring memory of Tails is his repeated deaths in this pit or that, being stung by various baddies or just being left in Sonic's dust as you speed on through all of the levels, regardless. In *Sonic 3*, he finally solidified his bro status – being able to carry Sonic while flying, with one of the big boss fights even relying on the duo's ever-trusting partnership. Aww.

Drake/Sully
From: Uncharted 3

7 The entire point of *Uncharted 3*'s campaign was about exploring and deepening Drake's bond with Victor 'Sully' Sullivan – once we're shown Drake's origins as an Aladdin-meets-Artful Dodger orphan thief, and Sully's rescue of him from antagonist Marlowe's thugs, Sullivan quickly became a mentor and father figure to Drake. As Drake ages, this fatherhood becomes brotherhood – each explorer learning valuable life lessons from the other, helping each other to become true friends – discovering, in the midst of their adventures, the true power of friendship. Or something.

Jak/Daxter
From: Jak & Daxter

8 The pointy-eared elf-thing Jak isn't really the best friend that you could ask for: Daxter, his fuzzy orange comrade, used to be an elf-thing too, but thanks to Jak's carelessness, Daxter gets transformed into an ottsel – some kind of weird otter, weasel hybrid. The bromance comes from Jak's determination to undo all of his wrongdoings, and as the pair progress, Daxter eventually manages to break Jak out of a prison lorded over by Baron Praxis. The fact these two would do pretty much anything for each other – it's inspirational, it's special… and to be brutally honest, it's a *very* Naughty Dog kind of relationship.

Marcus & Dom
From: Gears Of War

9 In the midst of the meteoric population of the bro stands *Gears Of War* – a game that takes a lot of videogame tropes and stretches them to the most ridiculous, emphatic extremes: muscles become MUSCLES, violence becomes VIOLENCE and –you guessed it – brotherhood becomes BROTHERHOOD. *Gears* as a franchise isn't exactly known for its shining subtlety, and even *Gears 3*'s 'brothers to the end' viral campaign shoved the idea of looking out for you bro so hard in your face that it's actually quite hard to forget that the Delta Squad are, at their core, a group of brothers. Oo-rah.

Ryu & Ken
From: Street Fighter II

10 Both masters of Shoto style karate, Ryu and Ken have trained together since they were young, and they fit into that kind of sibling-rivalry friendship that's otherwise lacking in our list (well, Garrus and Shepard could be seen as that, if you think about it). Both trained under Gouken, who was murdered at the hands of Akuma – and the rivalry between these two Street Fighter mascots grew out of a burning need to avenge their father. It's all a very intimate, and well-meaning storyline, and we all know that the best way man-friends show affection is by beating each other up right? Right.

THE VAULT

EAR FORCE I30 HEADSET

PUBLISHER: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£249.99**

WHILE TURTLE BEACH has become synonymous with a range of audio headsets compatible across a variety of game consoles. The company has recently branched out, with its recent iSeries product range, into manufacturing a range of devices that can be used with multiple media.

With Apple products in mind, the bulky, heavy design may not seem suited to daily use with an MP3 player or phone, while the square design is less elegant than other over-ear headphones on the market. In fact, it looks like you're wearing hardcore gaming gear. What it lacks in elegance, however, it makes up for in comfort and performance, boasting excellent noise cancellation, along with a punchy bass.

There are other features as well that anyone familiar with Turtle Beach's range of gaming headsets will be accustomed to, including dual boom-less microphones. Much more than offering high-quality audio to spout inventive obscenities down the mic at your pitiful opponents, it can be used for voice calling, while its leather cover is built with durability in mind.

The headset also has an inbuilt equaliser with multiple settings that can be activated either through an app for your iPhone or by the buttons adorning the side of the headset. There's also an option to add more anonymity to your barbed online exchanges, as the i30 includes voice morphing, which, as you might expect, is funny for precisely no time at all.

The i30 headset provides superior sound quality and a wealth of features to position it as a fierce competitor on the market. Designed for gamers, casual media consumption and audio enthusiasts, it's a jack of all trades, albeit with a look that certainly won't be to everyone's tastes.

On a purely technical basis, it's a superior device, but Turtle Beach might want to opt for a more stylised design if it hopes to extend its dominance beyond gaming culture.

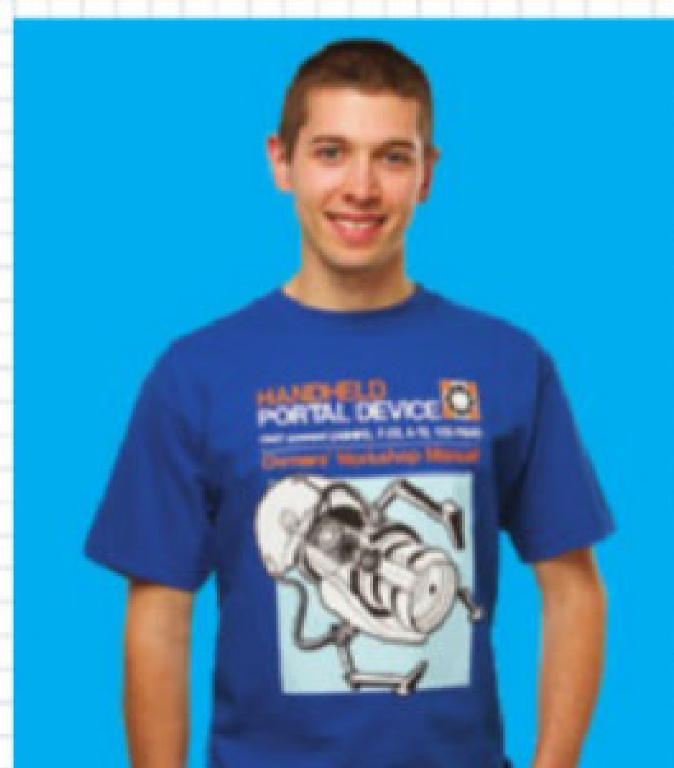


LINK ON EPONA STATUETTE

MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£281.99**

NINTENDO RECENTLY LAUNCHED its UK online merchandise store and what better way to celebrate Nintendo's treasure trove of geek delights than spending all of your hard-earned pocket money on this iconic *Zelda* statue. With the taciturn Link riding his faithful steed Epona – presumably into battle against Ganondorf – it celebrates the relationship between two of Nintendo's most beloved characters in one fearsome pose. This exclusive edition of *Link On Epona* was created to commemorate the 25th anniversary, crafted in a faux-bronze finish. It's part of an ongoing set of models from *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, but if you only have a moderate amount more money than sense and can only afford to splurge on one *Zelda* statue, then better make sure it's *this Zelda* statue.

GAMING CLOTHING



PORTAL DEVICE MANUAL T-SHIRT

It wouldn't be a Vault section without the obligatory *Portal* merch and this T-shirt fits the bill quite splendidly this month.
www.thinkgeek.com/product/1cd4



VAULT BOY ENDURANCE T-SHIRT

Any Vault-dweller knows that a bit of cardio goes a long way, but remind yourself with this *Fallout*-themed t-shirt.
tinyurl.com/nssnbfz



MUSHROOM STRIPED SOCKS

Get 1UP on your friends with these nifty mushroom socks. We're assuming they don't have additional life-giving powers.
store.nintendo.co.uk/cool-stuff.list



ASSASSIN'S CREED EDWARD'S CUTLASS LATEX REPLICA

RETAILER: **UBISOFT** PRICE: **$80**

Fancy yourself something of a filthy marauder, travelling the seven seas, plundering loot and generally being described by others as an 'unsavoury type'? Well, you're probably not the type of person who reads **games™**, then. However, if your unlawful aspirations are more likely to lead you down the route of playful cosplay rather than commandeering shipping vessels out along the Pacific, then perhaps this replica of Edward Kenway's cutlass from *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* would be the weapon best suited for you. With a huge 41-inch blade and a hand-crafted hilt, this latex reproduction features a fibreglass core, so it can withstand a sword fight or two. Or just whacking queue-jumpers at conventions.

SUPER SONIC PACK

MANUFACTURER: **SEGA** PRICE: **FROM £15**

What could possibly be better than a figurine of Sonic The Hedgehog? A figurine of Super Sonic The Hedgehog, obviously. What's better than a figurine of Silver The Hedgehog? A figurine of Super Silver The Hedgehog. So then, what's better than a figurine of Shadow The Hedgehog? Nobody cares – it's Shadow, for crying out loud! Anyway, if you want to add a few new levels of super to your toy collection then look no further than Sega's Super Sonic Pack, which features Sonic and two of his contemporaries in all of their golden glory. Sega undoubtedly continues to deliver some of the coolest gaming toys around.





RISK: MASS EFFECT GALAXY AT WAR EDITION

RETAILER: **HASBRO** PRICE: **£50**

If you've spent time fighting back the Reaper invasion across the galaxy and long for a little competitive action, then it's time to jump out of the virtual space and into the cardboard one. Risk, the dice-rolling war game popular with the whole family, has adapted BioWare's intergalactic role-playing game into a competitive board game. It's a simple case of choosing from various factions that battle for galactic domination, rolling some dice and progressing across the board – inevitably ending in a heated domestic row. If that sounds like your particular brand of fun, though, and would love more of the same plodding, glacial pace of *Mass Effect 3*, then this is the game for you.

LAST WORDS

Final thoughts from the last person left in the building



JENS MATTHIES

MachineGames

Creative director, Wolfenstein: The New Order

We've got a review of Matthies' latest game – *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – further back in this issue, but what does MachineGames creative director want to see from the new studio's first release?

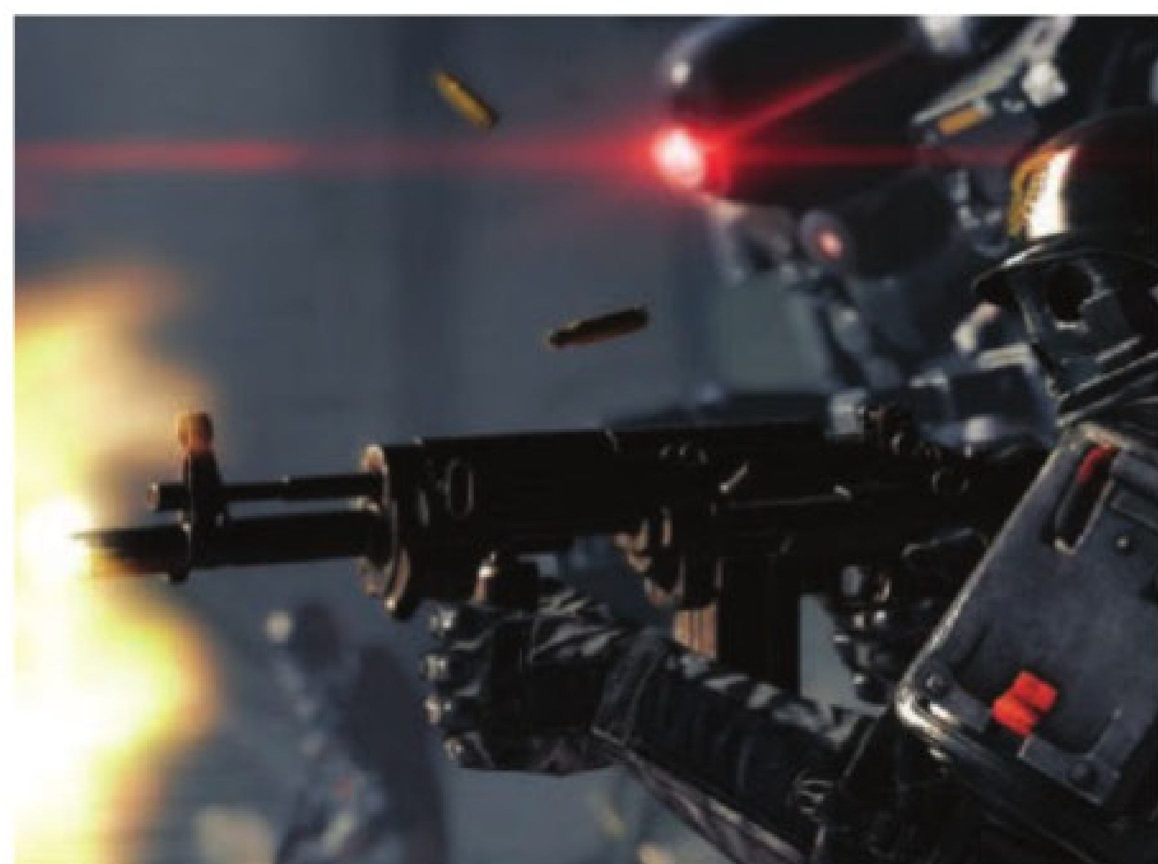
Why do you think that the franchise hasn't managed to appeal as in recent years?
It's hard to say, really. It doesn't help that the franchise hasn't appeared at regular intervals, and it's all really down to the execution of the individual games. I think *The New Order* will be received better, though; we're very proud of everything we've achieved here.

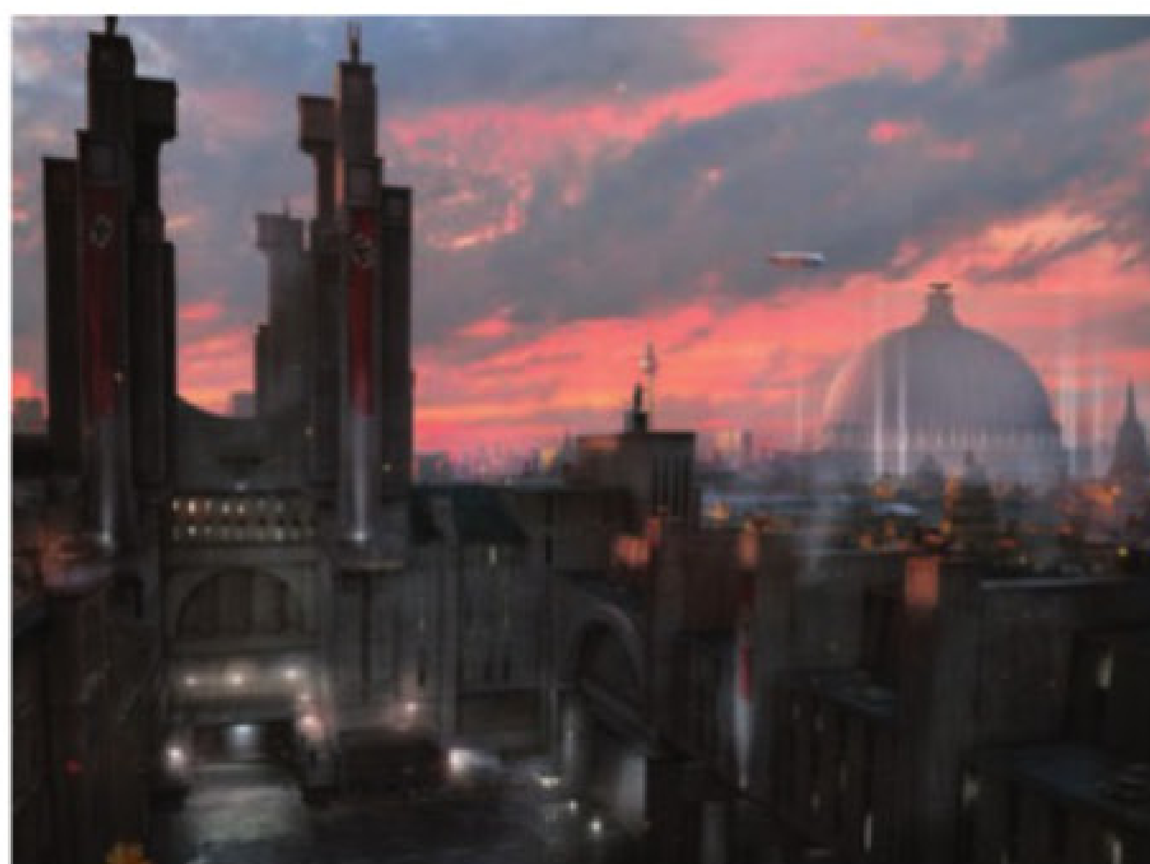
Has the game taken inspiration from any wider media outside of gaming?
Well, you are one guy that can kill thousands of enemies, or whatever – these things, by definition are unrealistic and OTT, but we want to couple that with human drama. We want you to understand and relate to these characters, so while things may not be realistic or plausible, they feel genuine and truthful and authentic. I think movies like *Inglorious Basterds* or *District 9* walk that line; in one scene, it's super intense – people are hiding under the floorboards, there's a lot of drama, and then in the next scene, they're shooting Hitler in the face and it's a completely different thing. We want to emulate that and walk that line between over-the-top action and drama.

Are we getting closer to understanding games writing as its own medium, like films and TV?
I think it's a really complex situation in games, because they can be so many different things. Movies are more restricted, but games allow you to kind of go and explore whatever you want – either physically or in the script. The level of storytelling in games is rising, though, especially in indie games. There are a lot of difficulties in scripting games that you also don't get in TV, though – trying to create an experience *with* the player, for example, is one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences if you pull it off.

What do you want people to remember when they look back on *The New Order*?
We just want to create the best possible experience for the player; you know, we want them to grab the controller, sit down, and then it's two days later, they're exhausted and they've played through to the end… It would be lovely if people saw the game as something that honoured the original *Wolfenstein 3D*, because that's really what we've been aiming for.

> We want to walk that line between over-the-top action and drama





The cinematic influence is clear in *The New Order*, and may well live to be part of MachineGames' legacy.

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20 CONTROVERSIES THAT ROCKED VIDEOGAMES

WORLD OF TANKS

The free-to-play phenomenon that's worth shelling out for

HIGHLIGHTS

THE EVIL WITHIN ■ WATCH DOGS ■ WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER ■ BELOW
BOUND BY FLAME ■ SHADOW OF MORDOR ■ ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV
HOTLINE MIAMI 2 ■ DRIVECLUB ■ HABITAT ■ GAUNTLET ■ H1Z1